

Botany and Betrayal:

Andre Michaux, Thomas Jefferson, and the Kentucky Conspiracy of 1793

Book Summary:

Andre Michaux is a name unrecognized today, but, at the time of the American founding, he was one of the greatest scientific explorers alive. He traveled throughout Europe, the Middle East, North America, and Africa in pursuit of new knowledge. His longest expedition was a ten-year long sojourn in the United States. His goal was to document its natural world better than anyone else had. His research took him as far south as the Bahamas, as far north as the Hudson Bay, and as far west as the Mississippi River. It's likely that no person alive had ever seen as much of North America as he had.

During his stay in America, and amid the tumult of the French revolution, Michaux was unexpectedly drawn away from his research and thrown into a conspiracy that threatened the foundations of the young American government. In 1793, the French government conscripted the scientist into their service as a secret operative. His clandestine task was to organize American frontiersmen in a bid to capture Spanish New Orleans and establish a new, independent republic in the American West. At the center of the plot sat an unlikely figure: Thomas Jefferson, the Secretary of State. Michaux's gambit posed a major challenge to the Washington administration as it tried to deal with it alongside international espionage, diplomatic crises, partisan politics, and angry frontiersmen.

When word of Michaux's activities reached the highest levels of the federal government, many feared that its execution threatened the foundation of the new republic. Washington, as president, saw it as a test of his administration. Failure to suppress, he and his Cabinet members, could undermine their authority and, with it, the federal government itself.

The Michaux Expedition tells this adventurous story through the remarkable but unheralded life of one of the most interesting but unknown figures in the Enlightenment. Relying on sources buried deep in the vault of the American Philosophical Society's library, historian Patrick Spero has pieced together this tale for the first time, and, in so doing, provides important new perspectives on the American founding that has left a legacy with us still.

Chapter XI

A New Mission

May 1793 – July 1793

Philadelphia

After all the adulation subsided, France's new ambassador, Edmond Genêt, found two things awaiting him: a letter from George Rogers Clark offering his services and a French botanist anxious to explore the very region in which Clark lived. This fortuitous coincidence provided Genêt with the perfect means to carry out his secret orders to attack Spanish-controlled Louisiana.

Clark's letter, written to Genêt's predecessor but now delivered to him, made clear that he was itching to organize a French-backed militia composed of angry American frontiersmen. Clark also reassured the French that he, and perhaps he alone, could succeed in such a risky gambit. He cited his service in the American Revolution as evidence that he could now help this new revolutionary movement: "This wish, this inclination, Sir, are actually as strong and vivid in my bosom, as they ever were for the cause of this my own native country during the most critical periods of the last American war Clark wrote to the French ambassador, "and the means of powerfully assisting yr country's cause, in the actual crisis of contest between it and Spain, are (I verily believe above any one private person on earth) actually in my power." Clark's appeal, referencing his dedication to the cause, tapped into the French revolutionaries' own fervor to see their revolution connected to the American one and part of a larger movement to spread republican government throughout the world.¹

¹ Clark to French Minister, Louisville, February 5, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 968.

Aside from sharing ideological principles, Clark also shared a plan similar to the one Genêt carried with him for how to accomplish this goal. He told Genêt that he had a network of spies who fed him information about Spanish defenses. This intelligence assured him that New Orleans was vulnerable. The population of Louisiana, Clark noted, was predominantly French or Indigenous, and neither group had any real affection for their current governors. Spain's hold was so weak, he told French officials, that he could easily capture all of Louisiana, beginning first with St. Louis and then traveling down the river to New Orleans. The only thing he needed was some funding and a few French ships (or, conveniently, privateers) that could blockade New Orleans' port. "In Illinois I can (by my name alone) raise 1500 brave men, or thereabouts," he promised, "With the first 1500 alone I can take the whole of Louisiana for France. I would begin with St. Louis, a rich, large and populous town — and by placing only two or three Frigates within the Mississippi's mouth, (to guard against Spanish succours) I would engage to subdue New Orleans, and the rest of Louisiana."²

The only thing he asked of the French Republic in return was 3,000 livres to cover expenses, a generalship (Field Marshal in the French Army, to be precise), land in the newly acquired territory, and French citizenship, because he intended to renounce his allegiance to the country which had so disregarded him. By becoming a French citizen, he also expected, probably naively, that the Spanish would view his actions as independent of the United States. "For our pay and gratifications in land, (as we abandon our own here) we shall confide in the Justice and generosity of the great nation we shall serve, after our labours are over," he wrote, "To save congress from a rupture with Spain, on our accounts; we must first expatriate our selves, and become French citizens. This is our intention."³

² Clark to French Minister, Louisville, February 5, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 969.

³ Clark to French Minister, Louisville, February 5, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 970.

Clark's fluid conception of citizenship may strike us as surprising today, especially coming from someone so central to establishing an independent United States, but it was a common feeling among American settlers on the frontiers of North America. In these areas, in which government controls were weak and individual ambitions were great, revolutionary ideas swirled, ideas that empowered individuals to reject governments with which they disagreed and assert their own ideas of autonomy and independence. Along the Mississippi River where Clark lived, Spanish, French, British, American, and Indigenous peoples intermingled and competed for control and individuals often had an option to choose the government that most suited their interests. For Americans recently freed from Great Britain, many believed that if once loyal colonial subjects could renounce their allegiance to a monarchy that cared little for them, they could do the same in a republican form of government. Indeed, as citizens were they not even freer to act, and, in fact, more obligated to support the nation that seemed to most serve their interests, national allegiances be damned? Rumors – real and imagined – regularly circulated that western Americans were negotiating pacts with Spain and others, all because the promise of the Mississippi River and the land west of the river seemed more an enticement to westerners' hopes for the future than the promise of the federal government to the east.⁴

The ease with which individuals were willing to switch their loyalty was a manifestation of the tumult and instability unleashed, in part, by the American Revolution. Many Americans, especially those far from the eastern seaboard, felt cut loose from national affiliations. Operating unmoored in this incredible moment of uncertainty, some let their own self-interest guide them more than any patriotic duty to a nation. Even a young future president, Andrew Jackson, got involved with this allegiance shifting. In July 1789, at the age of twenty-two, he signed a

⁴ Robert V. Remini, "Andrew Jackson Takes an Oath of Allegiance to Spain." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1995): 2–15.

document swearing an oath to the Spanish Crown. He needed to do so because it would permit him to grow his commercial activities by allowing him to trade with Spain; it was part a Spanish ploy to use access to Spanish markets as a way to win Americans to their side and weaken the United States. Others felt encouraged – or at least assured – by the ideals espoused by the French Revolution. Many French revolutionaries cast the war the French Republic was waging against Great Britain and Spain as a war fought for universal freedom rather than simply as a conflict between nation states over national interests. This ideologically infused battle also appealed to Americans who had just fought for a similar reason. For some in the West, joining the French Republic was thus not as much a betrayal of their country as it was an affirmation of their ideals and a continuation of what they had fought for in 1776 – a decision that also likely served their pecuniary interests as well.⁵

On May 18, two days after Genet had arrived to such jubilation in Philadelphia, Andre Michaux called on his compatriot. As soon as they met, Genet realized that he had found perfect the means by which he could reach Clark and his would-be French revolutionaries living on the banks of the Mississippi. Michaux introduced himself to the French diplomat by delivering a long report that outlined all that he had done. Michaux also told the ambassador about his previous negotiations with the APS and his uneasiness with the terms the organization had offered him for his westward expedition. “Toward the end of March,” he summarized for Genêt, “it seemed to me by the instructions given concerning the journey that I was considered as completely foreign to my own country and employed exclusively for the advantage of the Philosophical Society.” Instead, he assured Genêt that his loyalties were with France and that he would rather serve its interests and not those of the APS. “Dedicated to my mission in the service

⁵ Spero, *Frontier Country*, Chapters 9, 10, and Conclusion and Remini, “Andrew Jackson Takes an Oath of Allegiance to Spain.”

of the Republic, I wish to be employed in the way most useful to my country,” Michaux vowed. Genêt’s was thrilled to hear Michaux’s offer, though his response was surely not what Michaux had expected or sought.⁶

His ardent patriotism, fused with his natural history background, meant Michaux possessed everything Genêt needed to launch his clandestine project in Kentucky. “I cast my eyes on Citizen Michaux,” Genêt reported to his superiors in Paris, “He is active circumspect, loyal, and dedicated to the glory of his country; he speaks English, he knows the language and customs of the Indian nations.” Michaux’s years of North American expeditions had thus provided him with additional skills now useful for this military expedition. His language skills, including having learned some from his earlier guides, could aid Michaux in his attempt to navigate the many different cultures residing on the banks of the Mississippi. The mention of Native American languages also indicated that Genet also wished Michaux to enlist Native American nations in the plot.⁷

Genêt decided that Michaux should travel to Kentucky as soon as he could, ostensibly to conduct natural history research, but, secretly, to initiate the plan to invade Louisiana. It was the perfect ruse. “As he is accustomed to travel in the hinterlands of America, his departure can be suspicious to no one,” Genêt boasted to his superiors in Paris of his newly found deputy.⁸

An excited Genêt took Michaux into his close confidence. By May 22, Michaux’s attentions had shifted away from the APS, and he was committed to plotting a new western expedition with Genêt. On that date, Genêt officially appointed Michaux as “political agent of the French Republic” whose job was, in keeping with the French Revolution’s goals of

⁶ André Michaux to Genêt, Philadelphia, May 20, 1793, in *Andre Michaux in North America* 219.

⁷ Genêt to Ministers, July 25, 1793 *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 987-990, quote on 988-989 and Savage and Savage, *André and Francois André Michaux*, 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*

displacing monarchies around the world, “to deal with the French of Louisiana and the Indian peoples west of the Mississippi in order to restore freedom to the inhabitants of New Orleans.” Genêt drew up his specific instructions in a detailed document that Michaux and Genêt deliberated over for days. The final document called on Michaux to travel with all possible dispatch to Clark in Kentucky. Along the way, Michaux was to seek out Benjamin Logan, another general from the American Revolution, who was rumored to harbor sympathies similar to Clark’s. Michaux was then to find Clark and hammer out details with him. If they came to an agreement, Michaux had the authority to commission the American as a Commander-in-Chief in what Genêt called the “Independent and Revolutionary Legion of Mississippi.” Genêt also told Michaux to recruit others to join the cause, including potential Native allies, and appoint officers as he saw fit. All the while, Michaux was to continue to act as if he was a natural historian collecting botanical specimens.⁹

Michaux accepted the charge. Still, even Genêt, who was known to see only the positive, noted some subtle reluctance in the natural historian. While Genêt had full faith in Michaux’s “zeal,” he also detected the independent streak that had guided Michaux through most of his life but which came across almost as hesitancy. “He felt all the advantages of it and despite his love for independence he promised to fulfill this mission with the most ardent zeal,” Genêt recounted after meeting with Michaux. The French botanist always strove to pursue his research freed from external strictures, but he had almost always depended on others to underwrite his work. After having received word from the National Assembly that he was reappointed, he could now follow his own agenda, but Genêt was now, as other French officials had done before him, asserting

⁹ “Authorization to Michaux,” *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 995-996 and “Instructions,” *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 990-995. See also Charlie Williams, “Explorer, Botanist, Courier, or Spy? André Michaux and the Genêt Affair of 1793,” *Castanea, Occasional Papers in Eastern Botany* (December 2004), 101-102.

control. It was a compromise Michaux had navigated most of his life. In this case, his new directives were taking him further afield than ever before. This dedicated natural historian now had to launch a covert operation to organize an invasion of Louisiana as a means for him to botanize in Kentucky.¹⁰

Genêt and Michaux conferred several times in the weeks that followed to finalize details. As Michaux's departure neared, Genêt grew anxious. Genêt's initial fears of the Washington administration's disfavor proved true. While pro-French Philadelphians welcomed the diplomat into their fold, the Federalists proved no friends at all. Genêt knew that their animosity and the discord surrounding him could pose problems for Michaux, a relatively unknown Frenchman traveling through the hinterland – perhaps they would suspect he was indeed a foreign agent meant to upset American politics.¹¹

Jefferson, as usual, was the outlier in the Washington administration. He and Genêt became fast friends. In May and June, Genêt and Jefferson furiously wrote dispatches to each other – by the end of June, Genêt had sent Jefferson about twenty pieces of correspondence; Jefferson had sent his French counterpart eight. By the end of the year, Genêt had written Jefferson close to eighty letters, and Jefferson responded with more than fifty of his own. That steady exchange made Genêt Jefferson's second most frequent correspondent during this period, after only Washington. These letters were more than just diplomatic dispatches. The pro-French Jefferson saw Genêt as more than just a diplomatic colleague. He was also an ideological

¹⁰ Genêt to Ministers, July 25, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 987-990, quote on 989. On the role of scientific exploration, science, and spying, see Cameron Strang, *Frontiers of Science, Imperialism and Natural Knowledge in the Gulf South Borderlands, 1500-1850* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2018), especially Chapters 4 and 5.

¹¹ On the potential imminence of war, see Turner, "Genêt's Projected Attack," 664-665. For the way the improving relations factored into matters, see Genêt's summary of his discussion with Jefferson in Genêt to the Ministers, July 25, 1793, *Correspondence of Genêt and Clark*, 982; Crandall, "Genêt's Projected Attack on Louisiana and the Floridas," 118.

comrade. “It is impossible for anything to be more affectionate, more magnanimous than the purport of his mission,” Jefferson enthused to Madison soon after meeting Genêt, “In short he offers everything and asks nothing.”¹²

Soon, though, Genêt was asking his friend for favors. During a private meeting in June, Genêt told Jefferson about Michaux’s pending trip to the West. We do not know how much Genêt confided in Jefferson about his orders for Michaux (we do know he spilled much more later), but we do know he asked Jefferson to recognize Michaux as a French consul for Kentucky. Such an appointment would have justified Michaux’s presence in the region and permitted his free movement in it, but it would also have set a new precedent in U.S. diplomatic affairs. European consuls were common in many port cities because of the international commerce that happened in them, but there were none in the interior. Assigning one in the interior would set a new precedent, one Jefferson disliked. He turned down Genêt’s request because he feared that it would lead to a swarm of foreign agents filling the American interior. Jefferson knew that these men would be hard for the U.S. government to control and could prove to be particularly dangerous to the stability of the nation in these areas of limited government control.¹³

Jefferson wanted to help his friend, though, so he suggested a compromise that could serve Genêt’s purpose. Jefferson offered to write a letter of introduction vouching for Michaux as a natural historian. Genêt accepted the offer. Jefferson drafted a letter addressed to the Governor of Kentucky, Isaac Shelby, on June 28 attesting to the French botanist’s skills and need

¹² Compiled by sorting *Founders Online*, National Archives, “To James Madison from Thomas Jefferson, 19 May 1793,” *Founders Online*, National Archives.

¹³ Ammon, *Genêt Mission*, 83; “Editorial Note: Jefferson and André Michaux’s Proposed Western Expedition,” *Founders Online*, National Archives; and especially “Notes of Cabinet Meeting and Conversations with Edmond Charles Genêt, 5 July 1793,” *Founders Online*, National Archives.

to conduct research. Genêt was delighted. Short of the official appointment Genêt sought, a letter of introduction from the Secretary of State to a state governor was tantamount to a government-issued passport.¹⁴

As Michaux's departure neared, Genêt remained nervous, so he requested a private summit with Jefferson in early July. The meeting, he told Jefferson, was not an official one. He wanted to talk to his friend as two private citizens who shared a common cause, not as a foreign representative to the Secretary of State. "He said he communicated these things to me, not as Secy. of state, but as Mr. Jeff," Jefferson recorded in his journal.¹⁵

Genêt traveled out to Jefferson's house on the Schuylkill on July 5, a day after the commemoration of American independence. Jefferson recorded the scene in great detail in his diary, capturing the personality of the frenetic ambassador as he let everything fly. "Mr. Genêt," he recorded, "read very rapidly instructions he had prepared for Michaud." Genêt held nothing back. As his words spewed forth, he confessed everything, including the confidential details of Americans already involved in the plot. "It appears that besides encouraging those inhabitants to insurrection, he speaks of two generals at Kentucky who have proposed to him to go and take New Orleans if he will furnish the expedition about 3,000 sterling," Jefferson summarized.¹⁶

Genêt sensed Jefferson's concern, and echoed Clark's position that Clark's potential raid posed no threat to the United States. He assured Jefferson that these military maneuvers would occur outside US borders, and this technicality, Genêt claimed, absolved the federal government of any perceived complicity. It was, he insisted, a legitimate action of an independent group

¹⁴ Genêt to Ministers, July 25, 1793, *Correspondence of Genêt and Clark*, 982.

¹⁵ "Notes of Cabinet Meeting and Conversations with Edmond Charles Genêt, 5 July 1793," *Founders Online*, National Archive.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

committed to fighting for universal equality. That they happened to be former U.S. citizens, he claimed, was irrelevant.

For a historian looking back at the moment, Jefferson's response to Genêt's information was shocking. After hearing of Genêt's goal to raise a militia of Americans in order to attack Spain, a country with whom the U.S. was then locked in delicate negotiations to open the Mississippi, Jefferson, the Secretary of State of the United States, did nothing to stop Genêt. Instead, he took issue with only one part of the plan. His only concern, he told Genêt, was that Americans would likely face execution by the federal government if the scheme failed, not whether the assault could harm U.S. interests. "I told him that his enticing officers and soldiers from Kentucky to go against Spain, was really putting a halter about their necks, for that they would assuredly be hung if they [commenced] hostilities against a nation at peace with the U.S.," Jefferson recorded in his journal. What Jefferson said next gave Genêt the impression that he was otherwise fine with the mission. "That leaving out that article I did not care what insurrections should be excited in Louisiana," he assured Genêt. Although we do not know precisely what "article" Jefferson meant, it is likely that Jefferson was implying that he was comfortable with Michaux mobilizing disaffected Frenchmen, Native Americans, and others in the region for the cause.¹⁷

If the Secretary of State giving his tacit approval to a foreign country that was plotting to attack another foreign country, then at peace with the United States—an action that quite possibly could push the United States into war—was not shocking enough, Jefferson went on to do something even more dumbfounding. Genêt, feeling emboldened by Jefferson's response, asked Jefferson for a new favor. Jefferson had written a letter of introduction for Michaux on

¹⁷ Ibid.

June 28. Although concrete evidence appears lacking, it appears that at the time, he believed Michaux was going to Kentucky only to conduct natural history research and traveling on his own accord. In the original version, dated June 28, Jefferson raved about Michaux's skills as a botanist but said little more and was likely intended to assure those Michaux met, especially elite figures, that he was a legitimate researcher who should be welcomed and aided, similar to the letters Michaux had carried to Washington and Dunmore earlier. While it was an adequate letter for Michaux's scientific purposes, Genêt thought it insufficient for his political ones. He wanted Jefferson to add a clause that implied he knew of Michaux's real mission and endorsed it. "He now observes to me that in that letter I speak of him only as a person of botanical and natural pursuits," Jefferson wrote of Genêt's reaction to his original letter of introduction for Michaux, "but that he wished the governor to view him as something more, as a French citizen possessing his confidence."¹⁸

What the sitting Secretary of State of the United States did next, now knowing full well what Genêt and Michaux intended, is inexplicable. Jefferson acquiesced to the French ambassador's demand and revised his letter so it was more aligned with what Genêt's wishes. Jefferson's final letter maintained Michaux's cover as a botanist, stating that the primary reason for his visit was for research, something that Jefferson now knew was only partly true and surely the lesser of the two tasks Michaux had to perform. "Mr. Michaud is a citizen of the French republic who has resided several years in the US. as the Conductor of a botanical establishment belonging to the French nation. He is a man of science and merit, and goes to Kentucky in

¹⁸ "Notes of Cabinet Meeting and Conversations with Edmond Charles Genêt, 5 July 1793," *Founders Online*, National Archive.

pursuit of objects of Natural history and botany, to augment the literary acquirements of the two republicks,” Jefferson began the letter to the governor.¹⁹

In his original letter, written after the APS had raised the money for Michaux’s purely scientific expedition and before Jefferson had been fully briefed by Genêt, he had encouraged Isaac Shelby, Kentucky’s governor, to support Michaux in his scientific endeavors. As his original letter read, “I take the liberty of making this gentleman known to you, and of recommending him to your notice, your counsels and good offices, as they may respect both his person and pursuits.” After Genêt voiced his concerns, Jefferson completely rewrote this sentence to make clear that Michaux was traveling with the support of the French ambassador and the knowledge of the American Secretary of State. The new letter read: “Mr. Genet the Minister of France here, having expressed to me his esteem for Mr. Michaud and good opinion of him, and his wish that he should be made known to you, I take the liberty of recommending him to your notice, your counsels, and good offices.” Although Jefferson no longer advised Shelby explicitly to support Michaux’s “pursuits,” it was nonetheless a major endorsement that would ease Michaux’s travels and service to both his scientific and military mission.²⁰

Jefferson also gave Genet one other piece of assistance, perhaps inadvertently. After their meeting in June, he told Genêt that he should seek out Kentucky’s Senator John Brown, someone who had subscribed twenty dollars to the APS’s subscription list, for advice. He was someone Jefferson knew well. Before entering politics, Brown had been a lawyer whose early career was spent in Jefferson’s Charlottesville law offices. Politically, Brown remained loyal to his legal mentor. He was also, like so many of his Kentucky neighbors, furious that the Washington

¹⁹ “From Thomas Jefferson to Isaac Shelby, 28 June 1793,” *Founders Online*, National Archives. See especially the editorial comments on the drafting and redrafting of this letter. Jefferson maintained the same date as his original letter, though he changed its contents after meeting with Genet on July 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

administration had proven unable to gain control of the Mississippi River for American commerce. The historic record provides no evidence that Jefferson and Brown ever discussed Genêt's true intentions regarding Michaux's mission, but Jefferson surely must have known of Brown's inclinations and realized that the senator better understood Kentucky politics and local dynamics than he did.

In the end, Jefferson's connection proved even more useful to Genet than his letter of introduction for Michaux. Brown offered Genêt more help than he could have imagined. Brown, it turned out, was willing to do more than just write letters. He wanted to support Michaux's endeavors – *all of them* – in any way that he could. "He put me in touch," Genêt recounted of Jefferson's advice, "with several congressmen of Kentukey and in particular with Mr. Brown, who convinced that his country would never be flourishing so long as the navigation of the Mississippi were not free, adopted our plan with as much enthusiasm as an American can manifest. He showed me ways of acting with success, gave me addresses of many dependable men, and promised he would apply all his influence to the success of our plans." Senator Brown thus proved one of the most valuable assets for Genet's plans to reconfigure North American geopolitics.²¹

Brown's own letter of introduction followed Jefferson's lead. He used Michaux's scientific pursuits as pretext for the botanist's travel to Kentucky, even though he knew Michaux's real intentions. "From long study and research he has acquired the reputation of being an able botanist and visits Kentucky in the hope that among the plants and other productions of that country hitherto unexplored by the skillful naturalist, he may be able to make many discoveries as curious as useful to society," Brown wrote in a letter of introduction addressed to

²¹ Genêt to Ministers, July 25, 1793, *Correspondence of Genêt and Clark*, 982.

Kentucky's governor Isaac Shelby. But Brown did even more. In another letter, which he wrote to George Rogers Clark, he added words that implied he supported – or at least was cognizant of – Michaux's real objectives. "Any assistance you may be so good as to afford him in accomplishing his views, or attentions which you may please to pay to him during his stay in Kentucky will be conferring a favor upon a man *who deserves your confidence*," Brown wrote to Clark. The words that I italicized were, I believe, meant to indicate his awareness and tacit approval of Michaux's confidential mission.²²

With such sponsors, no one could question the motives of a Frenchman traipsing through the American countryside. While such letters assured the unsuspecting that Michaux was on a quasi-government-approved scientific mission, to anyone in whom Michaux truly confided, these letters easily signaled that this Kentucky senator and the U.S. Secretary of State were aware of the secret mission and perhaps even supported it.

Scholars have struggled to explain Jefferson's actions. There is, first, the issue of what really happened in his July meeting with Genêt. To help, we have Genêt's account, which jibes with much of Jefferson's. As the French diplomat reported to his superiors in Paris soon after the meeting, Jefferson assured him that "a little spontaneous irruption" against Spain posed little threat to the United States, a summary similar to Jefferson's own note in which he recounted that he offered no objection to an "insurrection" so long as Americans were left out. While the leading historian of Genet's visit has dismissed Genêt's account as exaggeration, there is nothing in his account that can be contradicted. In fact, his story parallels what we know happened. *We have other sources, for instance, that confirm that Genêt met with Senator Brown of Kentucky at*

²² Brown to Clark, June 24, 1793 and Brown to Shelby, June 24, 1793, *The Correspondence of Clark and Genet*, 982-983.

*Jefferson's encouragement and Brown did provide Genêt with a roadmap for Michaux – something this previous scholar missed.*²³

Historians who have scrutinized the episode noted Jefferson's unusual decision making, but they often also hesitated to condemn Jefferson. The editors of the Thomas Jefferson papers called his choice to keep Washington in the dark about Genêt's true plans "a serious omission considering the diplomatic consequences that might have ensued from an attack launched from American territory on part of the Spanish empire." Early on, a leading historian of the mid-nineteenth century concluded that "the most ambiguous position in regard to the whole affair of Genêt and his mission is that of Jefferson." Frederick Jackson Turner, in his study of the Genêt plot, was equally puzzled. "Jefferson's position in 1793 is less easy to explain," he concluded. "It might be supposed," two of the leading historians of the era, Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, wrote of Jefferson's relationship with Genêt, "that the Secretary of State would not henceforth have permitted any but the most narrowly correct official business between them. But this seems not to have been the case." "A near-traitorous action" is how the otherwise sober historian Harlow Giles Unger summed it up in probably the most pointed terms anyone has yet used to describe it.²⁴

²³ Genêt's account is in Genêt to Ministers, July 25, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 982. See Ammon, *The Genet Mission*, 84-85 in which he makes Jefferson and Genêt's accounts appear to be markedly different, with Genêt offering a rosier account of their meeting. See a deposition John Brown gave later recounting this episode in *American State Papers*, Miscellany, 1:931, <https://memory.loc.gov/llsp/037/0900/09470931.tif>. His reference to heads of departments may have implied Jefferson as Secretary of State.

²⁴ Andrew Johnston, "Citizen Genêt," in *Cyclopædia of Political Science, Political Economy, and of the Political History of the United States*, John Lalor, ed., (New York, 1899), 2:331; Turner, "Origins of Genêt's Plan," 669; Samuel Wilson, "A Review of 'Isaac Shelby and the Genet Mission' by Archibald Henderson," (Lexington, KY, 1920) has many summaries of earlier historians take on the episode; Thomas Ruys Smith, *River of Dreams: Imagining the Mississippi before Mark Twain* (Baton Rouge, 2007), 29; Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism*, (New York, 1995), 349. Harlow Unger, "Mr. President": *George Washington and the Making of the Nation's Highest Office* (Boston, 2013), 174. The exception to this hesitancy is Charlie Williams in "Explorer, Botanist, Courier, or Spy?," 102-103.

Indeed, one cannot help but wonder what Jefferson was thinking during this entire affair. As Unger noted, it would be unconscionable today if the Secretary of State learned of such a conspiracy and said nothing; indeed, Jefferson may even have used his office to abet the initiative. Placed in the context of the early republic, however, there are several possible explanations for Jefferson's actions and inactions. In fact, there is probably not one single clear reason for Jefferson's behavior, but instead a concatenation of events that all influenced his thinking, none of which necessarily absolve Jefferson of what might be considered duplicity.

First, at the time, there still existed a sense of a private and public self, and a holder of public office could easily separate these two capacities. Therefore, because Genêt approached Jefferson as "Mr. Jefferson," not as Secretary of State, Jefferson's duty was to maintain the confidence with which Genêt entrusted him. Jefferson thus felt that it was honorable for him to listen to Genêt as a fellow citizen of the world trying to encourage republicanism rather than a diplomatic official serving national interests.

Another factor at play was the developing party strife in the nation's capital. Up until this point, party politics remained controversial. Many Americans believed parties to be signs of corruption because, in the eighteenth century, political theorists argued that parties simply served their own private interests, not the public good. Evidence of parties or factions within a body politic were, according to this theory, a sign of illness. Four years into their untried republic, Americans were fast realizing that policy disagreements among a diverse and dispersed people were inevitable. Still, the idea of parties as legitimate forms of opposition remained taboo. That hostility toward dissent put Jefferson, a critic of the Washington administration's policies who was also a part of it, in a bind. Jefferson thus saw Genêt as a proxy through whom he and his

allies could safely voice their opposition, and, in this case, advance their interests in opening the Mississippi and perhaps encouraging American expansion.

There was more to Jefferson's embrace of the French minister than simple partisan jockeying, though. Jefferson's own deeply held beliefs surely influenced much of his behavior. Jefferson was an undeniable and fervent supporter of the French Revolution who, like Genêt, saw the American Revolution and French Revolution as part of a larger movement that was going to transform the world. A key element uniting Jefferson's thinking about the American Revolution with that of the French revolutionaries was the absolute sovereignty of the people. One of the things that troubled Jefferson so much about Washington's view of the federal government was Washington's assertion of executive power that, to Jefferson's mind, took power away from the people and hinted at a slow return to a hierarchical, almost monarchical, government. At the moment Genêt arrived, before the French Revolution's most radical and violent tendencies had yet to emerge fully, Jefferson saw Genêt as a figure of the French Revolution who could remind Americans of the spirit of 1776.

In fact, the idea that Genêt proposed – a body of men forming voluntarily to attack a monarchical power to establish a republic – seemed, to Jefferson's mind, an entirely natural occurrence in a global movement to expand republican principles. Such insurrections had occurred regularly in the years since the American Revolution. It was Jefferson, of course, who had made the famous quip in 1787 that “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” Rebellions, he argued in that same letter, were useful and necessary. “What country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms,” he concluded. With

his growing distance from and distaste for the policies of the Washington administration, perhaps it was time that Washington be reminded of the power of the people.²⁵

Finally, aside from Jefferson's ideological reasons, there was an element of callous strategic thinking. When Genêt was sharing his plans with Jefferson, Jefferson feared that war between the US and Spain over the Mississippi was imminent and inevitable. "Spain is so evidently picking a quarrel with us that we see war absolutely inevitable with her," Jefferson confided to James Monroe on June 28, just about the time Genêt was approaching him with his own scheme to antagonize Spain. Jefferson may have figured that, at a minimum, the United States might co-opt these mobilized militiamen if a war between Spain and the United States erupted. Even if war did not break out, if Clark launched a successful invasion of Louisiana, then the United States might gain the much-desired control over the Mississippi – and probably, over the long-term, acquire the territory itself. In short, Jefferson may have just assumed that there was little risk to the U.S.'s interest if Genet managed to launch a successful invasion, so long as Americans themselves were uninvolved.²⁶

One thing was clear. Genêt was deadly serious about the Louisiana invasion, and his scheme's success was entirely plausible. The privateering venture he had started in South Carolina was proving a grand success, with news of American ships capturing British ships regularly arriving in Philadelphia. Some of the prizes themselves were even brought to Philadelphia, in what many in the Washington administration viewed as an affront to their stated policy, leading the federal government to eventually seize them. Still, with American merchant

²⁵ "From Thomas Jefferson to William Stephens Smith, 13 November 1787," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

²⁶ "From Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, 28 June 1793," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

ships waging a proxy war for France in the Atlantic, there was every reason to expect that Clark's foray would prove equally effective.

Rightly confident and newly empowered by a U.S. Senator and the American Secretary of State, Genêt went about acquiring more letters of introduction for Michaux. He created a list, likely based upon Brown's advice, of all the powerful figures in the West, mostly Kentucky, who might be sympathetic to Michaux's real mission. By the end of June, Michaux had letters of introduction to some of the chief political players in Kentucky. In addition to the one to Shelby, Michaux carried at least twelve others, including two sitting congressmen, three former generals, and several prominent lawyers. All appeared to either be aligned with the political party then forming around Jefferson or were vocal advocates for opening the Mississippi River. The letters also provided Michaux with an itinerary. His first letter was for a prominent attorney in Pittsburgh, Hugh Henry Brackenridge. His next letter was for Colonel Alexander Orr, a congressman living in Limestone, Kentucky, an important inland port along the Ohio River. After that, he had several letters for figures in Lexington, about fifty miles south of Limestone, and Danville, then a hub of political activity that sat about twenty miles further south of Lexington. Of course, he brought a letter addressed to George Rogers Clark of Louisville too, his final and ultimate destination.²⁷

With his journey mapped out and letters in hand, Michaux began packing his materials in early July. It was a massive amount of cargo. A receipt states he lugged at least five-hundred and fifty pounds of baggage on his trip west. Though there is no itemized list of his goods, he likely carried his scientific instruments, herbarium, and tools. Michaux also managed to bury some arms and ammunition among the cargo, tangible proof to Kentuckians that France was ready to

²⁷ For the list of letters, see Notebook 7, June 22-July 1, in *André Michaux in North America*, 226-227.

outfit them. While there is no evidence on how Michaux paid for his travels, it almost certain that he was once again firmly in the employ of the French ambassador and Genet was able to provide him with the credit necessary to conduct his work.²⁸

On July 15, ten days after Genêt's unofficial meeting with Jefferson, Michaux was ready to depart. He met that day with Genêt one last time to go over plans. Genêt wrote up his final instructions and gave Michaux some final words of encouragement. "You will neglect nothing, Citizen," Genêt advised Michaux, "when striking Americans with these powerful considerations and when convincing them that their glory wants, that their interests demand, that they liberate themselves from the diplomatic shackles that oppose their wishes, the timid conduct of the federal government, in going to occupy new Orleans which is almost defenseless and where the inhabitants await them with anxiety well convinced that once they are the masters no force will be able to dislodge them out and that France will support them."²⁹

At ten o'clock that evening, as the moon lit the roadways and darkness cooled the summer day, Michaux started his trek west. Because Ducoigne and the Native delegation had long since left, Genêt provided Michaux with two French army artillerymen to provide protection for Michaux and who could advise Clark on their assault. It was a small delegation so as not to raise suspicions and modeled on the same type of small groups Michaux always traveled with on expeditions. This time, though, rather than having Native American guides or some of his skilled slaves as his traveling companions, he had military men by his side – a sign of his true purpose.³⁰

²⁸ Evidence of the shipment's contraband is found in Depauw's Deposition, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1104. The receipt is found in "Payment for Transportation of Baggage to Pittsburg," *Papers of the War Department*, <https://wardepartmentpapers.org/s/home/item/45009>.

²⁹ Genêt, "Michaux Instructions," *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 994.

³⁰ André Michaux, July 15, in *André Michaux in North America*, 227.

Armed with his letters of introduction and with his cargo of instruments – and some hidden contraband – in tow, he appeared to be a botanist laden with the tools of his trade embarking on a mission to observe the natural world and fulfilling his quest to advance knowledge. But the reticent and perhaps a bit quirky natural historian also carried clear but secret orders from Genêt that his primary objective was to initiate the invasion of Spanish Louisiana. He did so with the full knowledge of his scientific collaborator and US Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson. It was, to say the least, an unexpected turn of events for the natural historian who had largely avoided politics his entire life. In a matter of weeks, he had gone from planning a transcontinental scientific expedition under the auspices of the American Philosophical Society to traveling West as a secret agent for the French government. While he had hoped his time in the United States might let him transform the world of botany, if he carried out this mission, he would transform geopolitics in North America.

Chapter XIII

Organizing a New Expedition

Kentucky

August 1793 – February 1794

As Michaux made his way southwest along the Ohio River, moving further away from Philadelphia with every stroke of the oar, he veered into the frontiers of the young country. As he crossed into Kentucky, he noticed an important change. Rather than seeing sparse, often desolate towns like Gallipolis, he saw small but growing communities filled with men on the make. “Flourishing” was the word he used to describe one that he saw. It was in these towns and among these men that Michaux hoped to organize an army to invade New Orleans.¹

Kentucky was, as Michaux observed, a state in transition and very much on the move. Until very recently, it had been part of Virginia. Land hungry Virginians, along with others, rushed to settle there after Clark’s successful foray into the territory during the American Revolution. As the population increased and new farms stretched across the land, the federal government made it an independent state on June 1, 1792, just over a year before Michaux’s trip. One of the reasons the government separated it from Virginia was that no one wanted a single state to be too large and therefore too powerful in the union. The second was that its settlers wanted a regional government closer to them. This theme was a constant on the American frontiers. Though the images of hardy frontiersmen seeking autonomy have inundated our popular culture, elements of which were certainly true, it was also true that frontiersmen almost always petitioned for and sought to strengthen government and law enforcement. They just wanted it in their hands, not controlled by a distant, eastern federal or state entity. Of course, the

¹ André Michaux, August 23, 24, and 27, in *André Michaux in North America*, 231.

one federal institution frontier people often welcomed with enthusiasm was the U.S. Army and the defensive – and sometimes offensive – support it offered them against imperial rivals and Native American groups. Indeed, tensions between the military and frontier people could develop when the settlers perceived the Army as being too weak or ineffective.²

Michaux landed in Limestone in search of one of the proponents of this political culture: Alexander Orr, a congressman of the Jeffersonian stripe and someone for whom Michaux carried a letter of introduction. Michaux wasted no time in finding his first contact for his mission and paid Orr a visit the day after he arrived. While there is no known record of their interaction, the pair apparently hit it off. Historians have assumed that Michaux let Orr know of his real plans; certainly, if Michaux's meeting with Brackenridge was any indication, he did. In any case, Michaux told Orr that he planned to travel next to Lexington and then to Danville to meet with other weighty figures, all men Orr likely knew, including the state's first elected governor, Isaac Shelby. Hearing of Michaux's intentions, Orr volunteered to escort his new friend to Lexington to provide another, more personal, introduction to these men. Michaux accepted the offer.³

Then Michaux switched his attention to his scientific purpose. He spent the next couple of days in the field botanizing and examining the geology and soil of the region. He even found hints of woolly mammoths – one of Jefferson's personal priorities. "The bones of monstrous animals that are thought to be elephants are found nearby," Michaux noted. Michaux had his own ideas about these fossils. He disagreed with the emerging consensus, of which Jefferson was an ardent proponent, that these were bones of an elephant-like creature still alive and roaming the

² For this frontier political mentality, see Patrick Spero, *Frontier Country: The Politics of War in Early Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, PA, 2016).

³ For his arrival and visit with Orr, see André Michaux, August 28 and 29, in *André Michaux in North America*, 231-232. On Limestone, see Lowell Harrison and James Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky*, (Lexington, 1997), especially 52, for its role. Rueben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846* (Cleveland, 1904), 3:36.

area. Instead, the “great abundance of marine life remains found in these parts” led him to conclude that the bones came from some sort of marine animal.⁴

After a few days, Michaux and Orr started the two-day, sixty-six-mile trek to Lexington, which Michaux dubbed “the principal city of the state of Kentucky.” As Michaux headed south, he split off from his two artillerymen. He directed them northwest to Louisville, near where Clark lived, so they could conduct reconnaissance in advance of his arrival.⁵

Michaux’s scientific instincts remained strong as he traveled south with Orr. A stream of observations filled his journal. The whole countryside, to him, exuded stability and security. He saw fertile farms, hot springs, saltworks and welcoming homes lining the road to Lexington. The way he felt was perhaps the most notable thing about the journey. “Travelers can go without danger from Limestone to Lexington,” he wrote. That he noted a sense of safety suggests just how different Kentucky seemed when compared to what he had just experienced as he floated down the desolate Ohio River and areas that remained contested.⁶

Once in Lexington, Michaux followed the plan that he and Genêt had hatched in Philadelphia. He arrived on September 5. He made his primary home at someone named “Mr. Cradicka” (probably Cradick) and, occasionally, “Proutte” – names that appear in later correspondence, but the precise identity of whom remains uncertain. Michaux got right to work the day after arriving. On September 6, he sought out two men for whom he carried letters of introduction. One of those, James Brown, was Kentucky’s secretary of state and the younger brother of John Brown, the senator who had advised Genêt on Michaux’s itinerary. Although Michaux left no record of the meeting with this high-ranking state official, Michaux’s reception

⁴ André Michaux, September 3, in *André Michaux in North America*, 232.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ André Michaux, September 5, in *André Michaux in North America*, 232.

in the days that follow suggest that Brown welcomed Michaux and his mission with excitement and enthusiasm. The other person on his Lexington list was Joseph Simpson, a local leader who was well-connected in the community. Genet had also provided Michaux with some initial funds and it appears he also permitted Michaux to draw some funds in his name, so it is probable that Michaux also worked with locals to establish some sort of line of credit. Michaux, of course, managed to perform some botanical work amidst it all, something important for both himself and to provide cover for his main mission.⁷

His next stop was Danville, a few miles southwest of Lexington. At the time, Danville was an important inland hub for the fast-expanding nation. Unlike Pittsburgh, which sat at the confluence of three waterways, Danville sat at the intersection of several key roads. It had, in turn, developed into one of the most influential communities in Kentucky. At its center sat the Political Club of Danville, a powerful organization whose influential members advocated for the interests of Kentuckians. These civic leaders also had strong Jeffersonian inclinations, though their primary goal was to pressure federal officials for access to the Mississippi River. Michaux carried letters for several prominent individuals active in its affairs. While in Danville, Michaux also met with Pierre Tardiveau, the brother of Barthélemi, the man who was plotting with Audrain to create a French colony in Spanish Louisiana. This small frontier crossroad was, perhaps not surprisingly, a pit of intrigue.⁸

⁷ André Michaux, September 6 and 7, in *André Michaux in North America*, 232 and 483 fn. 40. On where he stayed and the line of credit, see "De Pauw's Statement," *Correspondence of Clark and Genet*, 1104. For Simpson, see Richard Reid, *Historical Sketches of Montgomery County*, (Lexington, Ky, 1926), 17-18. He appears to have been a builder and community leader in Mt. Sterling in the 1790s, likely based in Lexington before then. On where he stayed, see "The Testimony of Charles De Pauw," *Correspondence of Clark and Genet*, 1104.

⁸ Michaux had been given the name of a Tardiveau in Philadelphia, like Barthelemi, since it noted this person's home was Kaskaskia. For his visit, see André Michaux, September 9 and 10, in *André Michaux in North America*, 233. On the Political Club of Danville, see Thomas Speed, *The Political Club: Danville, Kentucky* (Louisville, 1894).

In between these private meetings, Michaux indulged his natural history inclinations. Much as Genêt had hoped, Michaux's scientific work provided the cover the secret agent needed to assuage suspicious onlookers. In fact, while we have little evidence of what transpired when Michaux met with powerful Kentuckians, we have strong evidence of what Michaux told curious onlookers when he encountered them in the streets. When he was asked what he was doing in Kentucky, he may have even implicated the APS; what we know for sure is that he dropped Jefferson's name as his chief sponsor. General Arthur St. Clair, the federally appointed governor of the Ohio Territory, even alerted Thomas Jefferson to Michaux's claims, thinking the Secretary of State might be upset. "Mr. Michaeu, at Lexington," St. Clair wrote to Jefferson, "gives out that he is employed by you to gather materials for a natural history of this country."⁹

While the subjects discussed in most of Michaux's early meetings are lost to history, we do know that he had a frank discussion with Benjamin Logan at his home outside Danville on September 11. This fact, along with Brackenridge's testimony, adds to the supposition that his earlier conversations likely followed a similar line. Logan was, much like Clark, a highly regarded veteran of the Revolutionary War, who had made his name serving as a deputy under Clark. In the years since, the retired general had acquired large swaths of land in Kentucky, including a primary residence twelve miles outside Danville and another large piece of property near Louisville. Genêt had received some backchannel hints that Logan might be interested in the scheme alongside Clark, so Genêt gave Michaux his name as a prime contact.¹⁰

Logan welcomed the Frenchman into his home, and Michaux spilled everything, much as Genêt had done with Jefferson. Logan considered what he heard. Like Clark, Logan knew that

⁹ Arthur St. Clair to Thomas Jefferson, 1794, *The Writings of Arthur St. Clair*, 326-327.

¹⁰ André Michaux, September 11, in *André Michaux in North America*, 233. On Logan, see Stephen Aron, "Benjamin Logan," *American National Biography* and Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, 3: 40.

Spain's defenses were vulnerable and its hold on the Louisiana territory precarious. He told Michaux that he thought the prospects for military success were good, but he also shared news from Philadelphia that deterred him from enlisting. Senator John Brown had sent the general a hurried note, likely well aware that Michaux would be visiting him, and warned him off the expedition. Something seemed to be happening in Philadelphia that was making Genet's former stalwart allies change their opinions, Logan warned Michaux, and Logan was worried that any Americans implicated would face the wrath of the federal government. It was the first hint of possible troubles for Michaux and the larger plan.¹¹

Michaux remained undaunted (and, as we shall see, Logan would reconsider his position). Two days after visiting Logan, the botanist was back in Lexington meeting with Isaac Shelby, the governor, to whom both Jefferson and Brown had written letters introducing Michaux in accordance with Genet's wishes. Again, there is no record of what transpired between the two. Some historians have suggested that Michaux shared nothing because Shelby did nothing to stop Michaux or alert federal authorities. Based upon what followed, that possibility seems plausible on one hand but questionable on the other – the lack of evidence makes it hard for a historian to draw a firm conclusion. What we do know is that Shelby would learn of the plot soon enough, and his political opponents, along with a raft of historians, would eventually scrutinize – and criticize – his subsequent actions, or, rather, inactions.¹²

Finally, on September 14, after Michaux's steady stream of meetings with the powerful and influential came to an end, he headed to his ultimate destination, Louisville, the home of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² For the strongest argument that Shelby knew nothing, see Archibald Henderson, "Isaac Shelby and the Genet Mission," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 451-469. For a rebuttal, see Samuel Wilson, *A Review of "Isaac Shelby and the Genet Mission,"* (Kentucky, 1920). See also Charlie Williams, "Explorer, Botanist, Courier, or Spy?" 103-104 to a sympathetic view of Shelby and for a more critical view, see Crandall, "Genet's Projected Attack," 118.

George Rogers Clark. Throughout his journals, it appears as if he traveled alone, though he may have had the two French artillery officers in tow. He arrived on September 16 and knocked on Clark's door the very next day. Michaux got right to business: "I gave him the letters of the minister and told him the object of my mission."¹³

Clark, somewhat to Michaux's surprise and consternation, appeared cool to the very idea that Clark himself had proposed just a few months earlier. "The enterprise in question was dear to his heart," Michaux noted of Clark's response, "but since he had written so long ago about it without any answer, he had thought the project had been abandoned." Michaux tried to explain away the delay and convince Clark that his services were still needed. However, Clark remained ambivalent, hinting that the insider information Logan had received was circulating more broadly. "A new circumstance appeared to put an obstacle in the way," a reluctant Clark explained to Michaux.¹⁴

Michaux spent the next three days in Louisville, primarily in conferences with Clark, trying to sway him and rescue the faltering cause. Clark's concern went beyond fears of the federal government's interference. He also worried about funding. He had to acquire boats, outfit men, and provide pay for regular soldiers. He told Michaux all of that. Finally, Clark asked for fifteen days to mull it over.

With their negotiations at a standstill, Michaux left Louisville on September 20 and returned to Lexington. Never one to waste a moment, Michaux took to the field. The Kentucky countryside proved fertile ground for his research. He identified flora new to him. He also made a connection with some of his earlier work that demonstrated his sharp memory and mental

¹³ André Michaux, September 17, in *André Michaux in North America*, 234.

¹⁴ On Michaux and Clark's meeting, see Journal entries for September 16 – 20, in *André Michaux in North America*, 234-235.

acutities. During one of his treks through Kentucky's woods, he spied a shrub (a species of *Fagara*) that resembled one he had observed in New York and another species he had seen in his Carolina treks. Even if his political mission was floundering, his scientific one was proving productive. "The surroundings are very interesting to visit for a botanist," he put it matter-of-factly.¹⁵

When not botanizing, Michaux tried to salvage what he could of his covert mission. Aware of Clark's money concerns, he sought out James Brown, the Kentucky's secretary of state and brother to the U.S. senator, once again. This time, we know they talked about Michaux's mission, and Brown provided a sympathetic ear – and more. "Mr. Brown was very much informed of our affairs," Michaux reported to Genêt, "He desires it could be effected." Brown then lobbied his wealthy friends to provide the aid Clark desperately needed. "Mr. J. Brown spoke for me to some Merchants of Lexington," Michaux let a wavering Clark know, "They have all promised to advance to me so much money as possible." The plot, which had received the tacit approval of high federal officials when Michaux had left Philadelphia, now also had the direct support of high officials in the new state of Kentucky.¹⁶

Michaux started to grow nervous after two weeks had passed with no word from Clark. On October 7 and again on October 10, he dashed off letters prodding Clark. For his part, Clark was surprised to receive Michaux's anxious missives. He was back onboard with the plot and had even sent a letter on October 3 to that effect. That letter had gotten lost – or intercepted. In any case, on October 21, Michaux received official word from Clark that he was ready to commit

¹⁵ André Michaux, September 15, in *André Michaux in North America*, 234.

¹⁶ André Michaux to George Rogers Clark, October 7, 1793, in *Correspondence of Genêt and Clark*, 1010; André Michaux to George Rogers Clark, October 10, 1793, *Correspondence of Genêt and Clark*, 1012.

to the endeavor. "I will surmount every obstacle and pave my way to Glory which is my object," Clark vowed.¹⁷

Weather, however, posed a problem. With the seasons changing and winter approaching, Clark argued that they should delay the expedition until the following spring. Michaux agreed. In the waning months of October 1793, Clark and Michaux had a furious exchange of letters in which they outlined the next steps each was to take in the coming months to make sure the military uprising against Spanish Louisiana was ready to be carried out by the spring. Clark dedicated himself to raising men and outfitting the expedition. In fact, he was already well on his way. Volunteers were enlisting, and Clark made some initial appointments. "I am putting my machinery in motion and appointing emissaries in every direction," Clark gleefully reported to Michaux. Clark also got to work amassing the flotilla that he needed to travel down the Mississippi River. He ordered one of his newly-appointed officers, Captain James Sullivan, to build a boatyard and to construct boats eighty feet long and eighteen wide – a not insubstantial ship and just one of many that would compose a not insignificant naval force. Records indicate that Clark would spend over \$1,000, acquiring massive amounts of food for his troops, two boats, clothing, and various other sundries. In fact, there is evidence that some of the recruits wore official uniforms.¹⁸

Despite this progress, Clark remained desperate for one crucial component for the expedition: armaments. He needed real military firepower, not just the long rifles common

¹⁷ Clark to Genêt, October 3, 1794, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1009.

¹⁸ The deposition on uniforms can be found in Dunbar Rowland, *Encyclopedia of Mississippi History*, (Madison, 1867) 1: 752 and especially J.F.H. Claiborne, *Mississippi, as a Province, Territory and State* (Jackson, MS, 1880), 152-153. This uniform likely dealt with another Clark (this one, Elijah Clarke) who was involved in the invasion's plans. For information on him and his involvement, see Absalom Chappell, *Miscellanies of Georgia* (Columbus, GA, 1874), 37-43. For his purchases, see Clark's Claims, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1071-1073. The record I am referencing here is "No. 2," on page 173. He would end up spending much more, as indicated by the other records. Clark to Michaux, October 15, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1013.

among settlers. He asked Michaux to get two small cannons which could shoot three-pound balls, smaller bore mortars, and howitzers. He figured these artillery pieces were powerful enough to serve their purpose, but also small enough that they could be hidden in common large trunks sent from Philadelphia, much as Michaux had done with the initial shipment of contraband he brought west.¹⁹

There was one other problem Clark foresaw, one more important than cannons: money. They needed much more. Genet had provided Michaux with about 3,000 livres (equivalent perhaps to about \$750) to help get the mission off the ground. Clark found the sum adequate to recruit and outfit ships, but he knew their grandest plans required much more. Clark was, of course, heartened to hear of Michaux's budding prospects among the merchants in Lexington, but he pressured Michaux to turn promises into reality. "I hope you can get what money you want in Lexington," Clark told Michaux after hearing of Michaux's early successes, "without it our schemes may be ruined." Clark outlined these desperate financial straits in a letter sent directly to Genet that Michaux was to deliver. In it, he warned Genet that the mission would only succeed if he secured more money. "The fund you have appropriated for the fitting out this expedition may answer the present purpose but the future expense will depend on the success of which I have no doubt [you will secure]," Clark advised Genêt.²⁰

With so much energy going into organizing the project, Clark and Genêt realized it was futile to keep up the veil of secrecy. The most prominent men in Lexington and Danville knew of the adventure, and some were trying to find more backers. Clark, meanwhile, was sending out feelers to possible recruits in his network. It seemed as if everyone in the region knew of the plan

¹⁹ Clark to Michaux, October 15, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1013; Clark to Sullivan, October 17, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1014.

²⁰ Clark to Genêt, October 3, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1008-1009.

– and, remarkably, no one seemed to want to stop it. “I find that we can get as many men as we please,” Clark happily reported to Michaux in October, “but it will be out of our power to keep our design a secret. It is generally known already but I don’t know that it will damage the cause much.”²¹

Clark was right. Open knowledge of the plot caused no damage at all. In fact, in the weeks that followed, enthusiasm for Clark’s foray only grew. By the end of the year, Clark had amassed a formidable force and received promises of additional funding from dozens of people. Twenty-two Kentuckians organized a new subscription list. In this one, signers pledged to support Michaux’s new military mission. Several high-powered individuals lent their names to it. The accounting record of the subscription is in British pounds, likely because they were trying to rectify it against a known European currency. It shows that the gambit attracted more than £100, probably the equivalent of about \$400. James Bradford, publisher of the *Kentucky Gazette*, put his name on it. The Lexington-based lawyer Levi Todd, the grandfather of Mary Todd Lincoln, also promised money. There is a second Abraham Lincoln connection. Michaux carried letters of introduction for and met with James Speed, the grandfather of Lincoln’s closest friend Joshua Speed.²²

In addition to those lending their financial wherewithal to Clark, dozens more, those without the same fiscal resources but with bottomless ambition, volunteered to fight. Such enlistments streamed into Clark’s home throughout the fall and winter. Though the stories of these nameless volunteers are largely lost, a missive one of Clark’s old war buddies, John Montgomery from Clarksville, Tennessee, wrote to Clark provides clues into the plot’s enthusiastic reception among frontiersmen.

²¹ Clark to Michaux, October 3, 1793 *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1009.

²² *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1073-1074.

Montgomery, like Clark, hailed originally from Virginia. During the Revolutionary War, he had served as one of Clark's colonels. Afterwards, like so many others who fought in the western theater, he headed out to stake a claim on the land he had conquered. He founded a town named after his old commander, Clarksville. When Montgomery heard of Clark's new expedition through a mutual friend, he seized the chance to rejoin his former leader. But more than that, Montgomery recruited others to serve under him. "I have collected the sentiments of a number of the principle inhabitants of this country relative to the matter, and find that it will be in my power to raise several hundreds for your Service in a very short period of time," Montgomery reported to Clark. Montgomery also decided to establish a fort on the banks of the Mississippi to aid the project. Its primary purpose in this early stage was to surveil travel on the river so as to prevent news of the plot from reaching Spanish ears. Later, it could be turned into a waystation for the assault.²³

Still, as Clark's preparations proceeded with alacrity, supportive Kentuckians began to realize that this military sortie could create a massive political problem for them. Jefferson's early advice to Genêt had indicated the harsh punishment that was in store for combatants should the scheme fail. The federal government, Jefferson knew, would consider an invasion of Louisiana by Americans a treasonous act and any surviving participants would likely be subject to capital punishment. To avert this potentiality, frontiersmen marshaled legal arguments that justified their actions. At a moment in which Americans were still sorting out the meaning of citizenship and the role of government in their democratic society, frontiersmen held that their

²³ Albert V. Goodpasture, "Colonel John Montgomery," *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 145-150, also available here https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/America/United_States/Tennessee/Texts/THM/5/3/John_Montgomery*.html; John Montgomery to Clark, Clarksville, October 25, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1018-1019.

obedience to the United States government and its policies ended as soon as they left US jurisdiction. Many on the frontiers argued that the proposed expedition – occurring, as it would, outside of U.S. territory – was an entirely legitimate action, one well within their rights as free individuals. They staked their claim on the belief that outside the United States, they were no longer bound by, nor did their actions reflect upon, the country from which they came, especially if, as in the case of Clark, they also renounced their citizenship.

Clark used such a rationale explicitly when he laid out his new plans for the invasion to Genêt in October 1793. “I find that I shall have to be very circumspect in my conduct while in this cuntry and guard against doing any thing that would injure the U States or giving offence to their Govt,” he explained to Genêt, “but in a few days after seting sail we shall be out of their Govermet I shall then be at liberty to give full scope to the authority of the Commission.” Clark’s interpretation of the law appeared to be the consensus among his peers. In fact, as word of the invasion traveled and support became widespread, men in taverns and around their hearths debated different legal strategies that would validate actions that many in the federal government considered illegal.²⁴

Michaux took part in one of these brainstorming sessions at the home of George Nicholas of Danville, another former military officer who wished Clark’s endeavor would succeed. Now a frontier lawyer, Nicholas came up with what he thought was an ingenious legal loophole to circumvent any possible interference by the federal government – though, surely, if the Washington administration had heard it, they would have found the argument specious. He suggested that Genêt should invert the sequence of events for the invasion. Rather than have Clark start the invasion upriver and then meet a French naval force at New Orleans, as Clark

²⁴ Clark to Genêt, October 3, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1008.

intended, Nicholas proposed that the French navy should start the invasion with a blockade of New Orleans. The French navy could then declare Spanish Louisiana conquered, at which point control of Louisiana would be thrown into legal limbo, and someone with Clark's leanings could easily say they considered Louisiana French territory by right of conquest. If Clark were to embark on his foray at that point and be attacked by the Spaniards, Nicholas argued, then Clark would have the right to claim self-defense when he answered their fire with his own. The ensuing melee might be seen as the fault of the Spanish who were then conquered and had no rights to act militarily, thus leaving the United States out of it. "In this way the Spanish government would have no reason to complain to the United States against breaking the pact since the French Republic was said to be in possession of this part of the country," Nicholas explained to Michaux.²⁵

Perhaps the most stunning proponent of this reading of international law came from the governor of Kentucky, Isaac Shelby. For most of the fall, Shelby claimed that he was ignorant of the potential assault on Louisiana, a somewhat dubious claim. His secretary of state was actively helping Michaux. Merchants offered aid to the Frenchman. Clark was amassing forces. It was, as Clark acknowledged, no longer a secret. Yet the governor reported to Jefferson in October that he had heard nothing of the plot. As Catherine Crandall, a historian who most closely studied this episode, noted with incredulity in 1902, "In October Governor Shelby would seem to have been almost the only personage in the West unaware of what was going on."²⁶

When Shelby eventually acknowledged that he knew of the operation a few months later, he relied on these same legal justifications to claim that he was powerless to stop it. "I have great doubts," as he put it to Jefferson in January 1794, "whether there is any legal authority to restrain

²⁵ André Michaux, November 10, 1793, in *André Michaux in North America*, 237.

²⁶ Crandall, "Genêt's Projected Attack," 118.

or punish them.” The state had little recourse to control its citizens so long as they followed the law, Shelby argued to federal officials, and there was nothing illegal about Clark’s actions thus far. Acquiring arms, building boats, mobilizing ad hoc militias – these were all legal actions that any citizen could undertake, as far as Shelby was concerned, and the government had no standing to arrest anyone involved in such legal activities.²⁷

He further claimed that even if he was aware of what the conspirators might do once they left U.S. jurisdiction, he remained powerless to stop them because no crime was committed within his jurisdiction, and he did not consider a possible future act a crime until it had been committed. “For if it is lawful for any one citizen of this state to leave it, it is equally so for any number of them to do it,” he argued, “It is also lawful for them to carry with them any quantity of provisions, arms, and ammunition, and if the act is lawful in itself there is nothing but the particular intention with which it is done that can possibly make it unlawful, but I know of no law which inflicts a punishment on intention only, or any criterion by which to decide what would be sufficient evidence of that intention.” It was a convoluted argument made to justify his own inaction – and it served as tacit support for the mobilization. Shelby’s reply also had imbedded within it a tension between state power and federal authority. As Shelby’s described, he considered Kentuckians citizens of “*this state*.” Those in the federal government, especially someone like Washington, saw citizenship and loyalty different. For them, citizenship was to the union and its policies, not to local authorities. It was a tacit admission by Shelby that would linger as events unfolded.²⁸

Shelby offered other reasons for his inaction that suggest his legal arguments were but a veneer for his true sympathies. He was hesitant to wield his authority to punish his friends, he

²⁷ Isaac Shelby to Thomas Jefferson, January 13, 1794, *American State Papers*, 1:455-456.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

said. Kentucky was a small place with a tight-knit elite. With so many of his peers supporting Clark, including some he considered friends, Shelby feared the backlash he faced if he tried to stop something so popular. “I shall upon all Occasions be averse to the exercise of any power which I do not consider myself as being clearly and explicitly invested with, much less would I assume a power to exercise it against men who I consider as friends and bretheren, in favour of a man whom I view as an enemy and a tyrant,” Shelby explained. His last point about the “enemy” and “tyrant” referred to the Spanish Crown and revealed his underlying motive. While the United States took a neutral position toward the French revolutionary wars and treated Spain as a trading partner, Shelby and other Kentuckians felt that the Spanish king was their true enemy for unjustly restricting American use of the Mississippi River. He used this same vein of reasoning to take a subtle swipe at the federal government’s own inaction toward the Mississippi and its apparently friendly posture toward Spain. As far as he was concerned, the federal government had made Kentuckians’ independent action all the more necessary. “I shall also feel but little inclination to take an active part in punishing or restraining any of my fellow citizens for a supposed intention only to gratify or remove the fears of a minister of a prince who openly withholds from us an invaluable right,” he continued.²⁹

Another reason for Shelby’s inaction was tactical. As one of his closest advisors, Kentucky’s Secretary of State James Brown, pointed out to him, even if Clark’s scheme was certain to fail, Shelby might use the threat of it to pressure the Washington administration to do more to open the Mississippi River for trade. “Such information might call their attention to our situation, and give our interests a place in their political deliberations,” Brown advised Shelby. Years later, when Shelby ran for office again, his political opponents scrutinized his actions – or,

²⁹ Ibid.

rather, lack thereof – in 1793 and 1794. Shelby marshalled a public defense that echoed Brown's earlier advice, "The attention of the General Government being thus drawn to the Western country, I deemed it a favorable time to make an impression on their minds of the importance of the navigation of the Mississippi, and of the necessity attending to that subject."³⁰

Here, then, on the frontiers and in Shelby's arguments, rested one of the gravest threats facing the United States' still very young federal government. On these frontiers, governors, frontiersmen, and other officials assumed they all had the power to challenge the official foreign policy of the national government, or, equally troubling, completely ignore it. With a federal government that lacked the power to restrain their actions, citizens on the distant frontiers of the young country could reshape government policy to fit their own views and serve their own needs. There was, in short, no authority willing or able to stop Clark because the only real government in the region – the state government –sympathized with and abetted his effort.

With Clark making such great headway and with no real impediments in Clark's march except for the lack of funding, Michaux decided to return to Philadelphia in November to confer with Genêt. He left to convince Genêt that they needed more money and more military supplies. One of the reasons for Michaux's departure was that he was experiencing his own fundraising problems in Kentucky. While the Lexington merchants had greeted the project with excitement, Michaux found it hard to turn their pledges into hard cash. These businessmen told the Frenchman that they were unable to produce the money fast enough – most likely, it was a case in which they were willing to support the endeavor in theory but actually unwilling to risk their own capital.³¹

³⁰ Ibid. James Brown to Isaac Shelby, February 16, 1794, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1040-1041; "Isaac Shelby and Genêt," 467.

³¹ "Depauw's Statement," *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1104.

Unbeknownst to Michaux and Clark, good news was on its way. In early October, Genêt had dispatched a team of four French agents to the region to provide Michaux and Clark with additional expertise, supplies, and new instructions. The four men had their own responsibilities, each key to the mission's success. There was Charles DePauw, a merchant born in modern-day Belgium who had come to America alongside his friend the Marquis de Lafayette during the American Revolution. After the war, DePauw chose to stay in America. He leveraged his strong French ties to establish a trading house in New Orleans which also had outposts throughout the West. Genêt asked this well-traveled sympathizer to escort the Frenchmen to Louisville. A carpenter with the last name of Mathurin joined him. He was to build the boats that were to "set fire to the vessels in the different ports of the country." The background and, indeed, true identity of a third man, Juan Pedro Pusgignoux (even his name is spelled various ways in the records; I have chosen the one that appears in a deposition he gave) remains a mystery, though he eventually played a central role in the way events unfolded.³²

The fourth, Auguste La Chaise, had perhaps the toughest task; certainly, it was the most secretive. He was to serve as the operation's Trojan horse. Genêt appointed the elite Frenchman an officer in the army then forming on the banks of the Mississippi, and Clark promoted him to colonel once they met. La Chaise's instructions were to travel to New Orleans, publicly renounce his support of the French Revolution, and settle in the city with his exiled royalist family, who were already living there. Once safely ensconced, La Chaise was to gain the confidence of the Spanish governor by feigning his own royalist sympathies. Then, when, the French Navy

³² Pis-Gignouse to Spanish Ambassador, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1002-1003 and Carondelet to Alcudia, No. 29, *Correspondence of Clark and Genet*, 1046-1048

bombarded the port from the sea and Clark's army laid siege to it by land, La Chaise was to burn the city from within.³³

The foursome arrived in Limestone soon after Michaux had left. The place was abuzz with word of the invasion. Money, they learned, remained the chief problem. DePauw decided to tap into his deep resources to solve it. He auctioned off most of his inventory and donated the proceeds to Clark. Mathurin also got right to work constructing additional boats.³⁴

La Chaise, meanwhile, secured the greatest victory yet: he convinced Benjamin Logan to throw his name behind the effort. Before meeting with the former general, the French-speaking La Chaise met with Pierre Tardiveau, Batholemi's brother, for advice and ended up employing him as an interpreter in the region. With Tardiveau in tow, La Chaise visited various homes to recruit more members of the Kentucky elite. In late December, the two called on Benjamin Logan, the general who had rebuffed Michaux earlier. Logan's perspective had changed since his initial meeting with Michaux. As he watched Clark's efforts gain steam, Logan's sentiments shifted, a sign of just how strong the movement had grown. In his letter to Clark announcing his decision to serve, he offered the same rationale that others used to justify actions that seemed to be independent from – even in opposition to – the foreign policy of the United States. “I have taken my leave of appointments in this state of the united states and do presume I am at liberty to go to any foreign country I pleas and intend so to do,” he promised Clark on December 31.³⁵

A few weeks later, on January 25, 1794, a recruiting advertisement for Clark's scheme appeared in the *The Centinel of the North-Western Territory*, the leading newspaper in the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “De Pauw's Statement,” *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1104.

³⁵ On Tardiveau being an interpreter, see *Barthelemi Tarvideau*, 86-67, fn 72 and Crandall, “Genêt's Projected Attack,” 114-115, Fn. 3. Logan to Clark, December 31, 1793, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1026.

region. The text was likely a reproduction of recruiting bills that littered the frontier, hung from trees on roads, were displayed in town squares, and posted in taverns, and which eventually made their way to the editor. Mostly likely written by Genet, it exuded brash confidence. Clark, the piece announced, was now a Major General in the French Army and “Commander-in-chief of the French Revolutionary Legion on the Mississippi River.”³⁶

It went on to lay out in detail the project that Clark was leading: “For the reduction of the Spanish posts on the Mississippi, for opening the trade of the said river, and giving freedom to its inhabitants.” It offered generous inducements for those considering the opportunity. Every soldier, the ad promised, would receive 1,000 acres of land in the newly conquered territory; those who continued to serve after the capture of Spanish Louisiana could receive up to 2,000 acres of land. Of course, the call for recruits made clear that all soldiers were also entitled to “All lawful plunder ... agreeable to the custom of war.”³⁷

There is strong evidence that this recruiting worked. On the same day that the notice appeared in the newspaper, an anonymous source in Lexington sent Senator Brown secret intelligence outlining Clark’s stunning success in very specific detail. It laid bare exactly how advanced plans were and how serious the invasion appeared to outside observers. More than 2,000 men, led by some of the most well-known figures on the frontier, stood ready to launch a coordinated attack within a month. As the informant wrote of the operations:

General Logan has, I am told, embarked in the enterprize as second in command, and will unless prevented by the Federal Arm, proceed down the River before the last of February, at the head of two thousand men. Clark it is said has resumed his sobriety, and attention, & yet promises to renew his fame. Colo. Montgomery of Cumberland at the head of two hundred men has stationed himself at the mouth of Cumberland River with a view of intercepting any Boats which might carry information to the Spainards of their designs. When you hear that Logan is among the adventurers you will easily conceive that a

³⁶ For Genet’s authorship, see “De Pauw’s Statement,” *Correspondence of Clark and Genet*, 1104. Jefferson also noted that Genet had authored a proclamation in his note in the *Anas*.

³⁷ *The Centinel of the North-Western Territory*, January 25, 1794.

number of very influential old Buffaloe Hunters are engaged in it. Colo. Hall, Majr Lanier of Bourbon & some others of that County have nearly compleated the enlistment of a Regiment, & procure men with more ease than when the late Campaign was the object. So popular is the undertaking here that I fear Government will want power, either to prevent it, or to punish the adventurers.³⁸

The report laid bare the dramatic situation then developing on the banks of the Mississippi. Kentuckians had managed to organize a large and complex military operation in very short order. The speed with which it was organized, and the size of the operations, reflected the very unsettled nature of life within the young United States, especially for those living in the West. The over 2,000 men prepared to invade Louisiana were driven by a series of overlapping motives. They were frustrated by what they considered the inaction of the federal government to open the Mississippi. Some were spurred, as was clear with Clark, for a desire for greater martial glory. Many also had their own pecuniary interests in mind and liked the prospect of capturing new territory for themselves and opening the Mississippi for their trade.

By the time of this report, this extralegal group began to take on the shape of an unofficial government, potentially creating a legitimate challenge to the federal government. Troops mustered, decked out in official garb, arms were acquired, and leaders created forts meant to regulate travel in the area and control the flow of people and information so as to protect the mission's secrecy. As the letter writer bemoaned, one of the most troubling part of the mobilization was that it was all done free from the federal government. Indeed, it appeared as if the federal government was completely unaware of what was happening within its own territory. Even worse, the informant suspected that the federal government was so weak, that even when it did find out, there was little it could do to stop the invasion from happening, something the letter writer knew posed a serious threat to the stability of government and the future of the republic.

³⁸ "Enclosure: Extract of A Letter from Kentucky, 25 January 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

Little did the informant know that when he confided to the senator from Kentucky, he was entrusting this information to one of the people who helped Michaux put these dangerous plans into motion.

This report, along with others then circulating in Philadelphia, meant that Clark's largely unimpeded effort to organize a legion of Americans for the French government was about to face a serious new obstacle: the United States' government. In fact, a hint of what was coming appeared just beneath Clark's recruiting statement. The newspaper published a second announcement that made clear that the federal government had received word of Clark's endeavor and was mightily displeased. Arthur St. Clair, the federally appointed governor of the Northwest Territory, published an official and stern proclamation that denounced the plot and ordered all American citizens involved to abandon it and return to their homes. St. Clair's address laid out the geopolitical situation and the established policy of the United States. He described the warring factions and made note that while the United States had an alliance with France from the American Revolution, in this conflict the United States was maintaining "an exact neutrality" that called on all Americans to treat each belligerent nation "perfectly equal." He then made it very clear that Americans were to stand down, declaring that all inhabitants in the Northwest were "required and commanded to observe a strict neutrality towards Spain, to abstain from every hostility against the subjects or settlements of that Crown" and forbidding them to "aid or abett" any French officials trying to organize Americans for an invasion.³⁹

St. Clair even named the four newly arrived French emissaries as dangerous foreign agents and ordered American citizens to ignore their entreaties. He also instructed local authorities to arrest the men if they tried recruiting Americans. In fact, the placement of this

³⁹ *The Centinel of the North-Western Territory*, January 25, 1794.

chastisement next to Clark's recruiting advertisement suggests that the editor of the newspaper wanted to warn citizens away from Clark's calls as much as broadcast them, and St. Clair himself may have facilitated the publication of the poster alongside his rebuke.

St. Clair also added a piece of news meant to jolt the organizers. He reported that the United States government had learned of these French operatives and of the proposed invasion from secret Spanish informants who were feeding them intelligence about the happenings in the West. Clearly, Colonel Montgomery's goal to create a base on the Mississippi that would prevent the flow of information down the river into Spanish Louisiana proved a futile endeavor. Someone had managed to leak news to the Spaniards. The Spanish, it was clear, were throwing up their own obstacles to fend off a potential invasion. Having themselves been involved in earlier plots that tried to bring Americans into their fold, they knew that the reports from Kentucky were a serious and legitimate threat to their own existence. With Spain alerting the Washington administration of the plot, it was clear that the federal government was going to have to act to avoid a conflict that could upend their foreign policy and diplomatic relations.

As the plot received this unwelcome attention, Michaux, it seemed, had escaped the region just in time. He remained unnamed in all pronouncements and thus avoided the same public scrutiny as the newest arrivals in the area. Still, St. Clair's proclamation was a sign that while Michaux had been on his western expedition, something significant had happened in the East. Michaux was about to discover all that had transpired in Philadelphia and beyond in the months that he was away.

Chapter XV

The End of an Expedition

Spring and Summer 1794

While Michaux was hunkered down at his Charleston garden, matters back in Philadelphia were getting hotter, in large part because a steady stream of reports from Kentucky suggested that Clark's invasion of Louisiana was imminent. In fact, Michaux's escape from the capital had been as well timed as his departure from Kentucky. As news from the frontiers flowed into the Washington administration, the president and his Cabinet analyzed every morsel of intelligence. Every bit of news confirmed that Clark's expedition was receiving widespread support in Kentucky and there was little anyone was doing to stop it.

Soon after assuming the post, the new Secretary of State, Edmund Randolph, received several dispatches from American informants confirming the Spanish reports. In fact, if anything, Randolph's information painted an even direr picture. Clark had reportedly amassed an enormous arsenal. By the spring of 1794, he had secured several large pieces of artillery, including cannons, with even more on the way. Rumor had it that the commandant of Fort Vincennes promised to donate some of the fort's armaments to the cause. Money had also started to flow again. The arrival of a French agent, likely carrying the \$400 Michaux had sent in January, provided the fiscal reinforcement Clark needed to alleviate his financial woes. Flush with cash, he made a massive purchase at the end of March – 500 pounds of gunpowder and one ton of cannonballs. One letter writer informed federal officials that Kentucky iron forges burned

brightly as their operators shifted their resources to smelt more cannons to meet Clark's demand.¹

Even worse, local and state governments showed no interest in stopping what the federal government saw as illegal – indeed even potentially traitorous – activities. “The measure of the expedition was openly advocated,” a secret informant confided to Secretary of War Henry Knox, “and not opposed by any considerable numbers.” Travelers noticed that while the federal government's stern proclamations against the attack circulated widely in Ohio, these proclamations were found nowhere in Kentucky. In a particularly ominous sign, several officers in Clark's regiment reportedly auctioned their Kentucky lands, an indication that they soon expected to move elsewhere. With anticipation mounting, reports to the federal government pegged April 15 as the day of departure.²

Spanish officials spent the winter and spring preparing for the attack, only further ratcheting up the tension in the region and in the halls of power. In internal discussions, Spanish military officers acknowledged that Clark's estimation of their weak defenses was correct. They suspected that a small but well-armed and dedicated group of American frontiersmen could easily overrun them. One Spanish officer predicted that if the situation remained unchanged, Americans would control the Spanish forts along the Mississippi by the start of summer. The Spanish had, he counted, a mere ninety soldiers to defend the vast territory and a measly two hundred in volunteer militias, many of French descent. The latter, he noted, “can be but little trusted.”³

¹ For the rumor, see Carondelet to Alcudia, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1048. For the purchase, and departure day, see “Extract of a letter from Lexington, Ky,” *American State Papers*, I: 458. For iron works and auctions, see *American State Papers*, I:459-460.

² Carondelet to Alcudia, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1046-1051. *American State Papers*, I: 459-460.

³ Carondelet to Alcudia, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1027-1029.

To buttress their position, Spanish diplomats worked to strengthen their military alliances with Native groups in the region. In moments like this one, in which European nations competed against each other, relationships with Native groups were of paramount importance to these European rivals. A strong military partnership with a Native power could provide one side with the additional force necessary for victory. In October of 1793, just as Michaux and Clark were beginning to mobilize forces on the Mississippi, desperate Spanish officials concerned about a pending attack met with Native American leaders from the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek nations at Fort Nogales, near modern-day Vicksburg, Mississippi to try to secure their military aid. After days of negotiating, they succeeded and secured an alliance that they hoped would help them defend against a potential American assault.⁴

The terms of the treaty at Nogales captured the strategic complexities of diplomacy in these areas of contestation. First, the Creeks, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Cherokees all vowed to maintain “pacific intentions” toward the United States while Spain remained engaged in negotiations with the Washington administration. Spanish officials realized that maintaining the peaceful *status quo* was essential to their separate talks with the U.S.. Should the Creeks or another Native group cohabiting with Spain become embroiled in a war with the United States, then the US could use that conflict to justify capturing Spanish territory, thus upsetting the delicate diplomatic situation Spain was in with the United States over the Mississippi.

In turn, Spanish officials at Nogales recognized the Native groups’ territories as belonging to these Indigenous nations; such acknowledgments of sovereignty were paramount to Native diplomats, who were trying to fend off the imperial ambitions of these European and

⁴ Carondelet to Alcuia, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1038-1040 and Gayoso to Alcuia, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1042-1045. For more on this imperial system of strategy and diplomacy, the formative book is Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge, UK, 2010).

American countries. Such an acknowledgment of their sovereignty by one European empire, such as Spain, could provide Native groups with important leverage in their negotiations with other foreign powers. With the Spanish recognizing their land, the Creeks, Chickasaws, and Cherokees had an incentive to avoid war with the Americans because, should the US defeat them, then the Spanish recognition would lose its significance.⁵

In exchange, these Native nations promised defensive aid to the Spanish should any foreign force attack the Spanish posts in Louisiana. Their assistance, Louisiana's governor Francisco Luis Hector de Carondelet realized, was the only way the Spanish could successfully protect their territory from Clark's invasion. He knew that Clark's intelligence was right. Spanish Louisiana could easily be captured by a small but determined force of American frontiersmen. "The advantages which result to Spain from this negotiation are so obvious," the governor boasted to his superiors in Spain, "we are able to avail ourselves of the nations mentioned, principally the Cherokees and Chickasaws, to oppose their attempts; whereas we neither have troops to oppose them, nor can count on the great part of the militia composed of Frenchmen." Without this treaty and the military alliances it promised, the governor was sure Spain faced a calamity. "I do not believe that the king can keep Louisiana or at any rate that its total devastation can be prevented," he predicted should they lose these allies.⁶

With the treaty secured, Spanish officials shifted their focus and began preparing for the expected onslaught. They enhanced their forts, especially the one at Nogales, increased their forces, and marched through villages, hoping that displays of their growing military might would cow residents sympathetic to France.⁷

⁵ See especially Carondelet to Alcuia, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1038-1040.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gayoso to Alcuia, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1042-1045.

Back in Philadelphia, meanwhile, Washington knew that the country was teetering on the brink of war and that he had to take measures to avoid what he feared would be a disaster for the country. Just as Spanish diplomats had to think multi-dimensionally when negotiating with their Native partners, so too did Washington have to navigate complex diplomatic waters involving British, French, Spanish, and Native American interests. In fact, Washington's challenge was even more complicated. While Spain was in open conflict with France and in an alliance with Great Britain, Washington had to make sure the United States maintained its neutrality towards all three of these warring countries. A difficult position in the best of times, with Genêt, he also had a French ambassador stirring up public opposition to his policy and trying to wage a quasi-war against France's enemies by outfitting American ships and arming citizens. Then, there were the sentiments of frontier people who demanded the free use of the Mississippi and were threatening an assault on Spanish Louisiana to achieve it.

On top of it all, Washington had to worry about Native American relations. North of where Clark was mobilizing, American forces and Native groups like the Miami and Delaware (Lenape) were locked in a standoff. The U.S. and Native nations in the Ohio had been fighting over control of the territory since the close of the Revolution. At the moment, a tense armistice had descended on the area, and Washington was trying to formalize the peace through a treaty. Continued combat appeared likely, however, if this diplomacy failed, and Washington was simultaneously preparing for an offensive that could secure American dominance. He thus knew that he may have to call up local forces in case of a conflict, and Clark's gambit could rob the government of this potential manpower. Clark's proposed act of violence – even if aimed at the

Spanish – could easily upset Washington’s strategy and would surely upset the greater stability he sought for the region.⁸

With war possible on several fronts, Washington had to strike a delicate balance, one in which he maintained American neutrality with European nations and managed relations with Native American groups. A note Knox wrote to Wayne outlined Washington’s decision making and made clear the multi-dimensional strategic thinking Washington had to use when navigating American diplomacy, one in which America’s relations with Native American and European nations intermixed equally in his grand analysis of the United States’ foreign policy. Secretary of War, Henry Knox, made this approach clear in a letter he sent to Anthony Wayne soon after a Cabinet meeting decided that they needed to send Wayne reinforcements. "Upon the most mature consideration of this subject," Knox wrote to Anthony Wayne, "the President of the United States has conceived that the national interests and dignity are intimately blended with the measure of terminating the western Indian war during the course of the present year. The necessity of such an event is greatly enhanced by the consideration of the critical position of our affairs with some of the European powers." Washington, then, had to balance potential conflicts on multiple fronts, and a misstep on any one of them could result in warfare on all of them.⁹

As reports of American militias amassing on the banks of the Mississippi streamed into the administration, Clark’s plot became a test of the federal government’s domestic authority as much as it was an international crisis. Washington wasted no time in making his feelings known. He and his administration needed to act with firmness lest his government lose control of the country. The crackdown began in February 1794, when Edmund Randolph, the newly appointed

⁸ For an example of how these issues became interwoven, see Knox’s letter to Anthony Wayne on March 31, 1794 that is included as footnote 1 in “To George Washington from Henry Knox, April 2, 1794,” *Founders Online*, National Archives.

⁹ “To George Washington from Henry Knox, 15 May 1794,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, footnote 1.

Secretary of State, sent a pointed letter to Kentucky's governor, Isaac Shelby, ordering him to use his authority to tamp down the rebellion. As more news arrived throughout the month, including reports of a looming launch date, Washington had had enough. He fumed to colleagues as he fretted about the country. He dreaded the prospect of war. Worse, he feared the dissolution of the Union. Kentucky, he worried, was on the verge of independence, a grave threat to the stability of his government.¹⁰

On March 10, Washington and his Cabinet met to debate the best way to deal with Clark's potential invasion of Spanish Louisiana. Once again, the divisions between Jeffersonians and Federalists emerged. Washington agreed to take four actions to stop Clark's activities, three of which the Jefferson-influenced Randolph supported. Randolph agreed with his colleagues that the president should issue a proclamation denouncing the French agents and the mobilization. He agreed that a Cabinet Secretary should send another stern letter to the governor of Kentucky "upon the subject of his conduct," and he agreed that Congress should formally outlaw behavior such as Clark's. Randolph was the lone dissent on the fourth proposal: to have General Anthony Wayne send troops to a fort along the Mississippi and "intercept by force, if necessary" an American-led invasion.¹¹

Randolph objected to the use of federal troops to stop American citizens, though he cast his opinion in terms far subtler than Jefferson had when he had disagreed with the president. His dissent, nonetheless, revealed the underlying differences between the Jeffersonian and Federalist

¹⁰ "Enclosure: Extract of A Letter from Kentucky, 25 January 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives and "To George Washington from Edmund Randolph, 27 February 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives. On James Brown, see James Brown to Shelby, February 16, 1794, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1040-1042.

¹¹ "Cabinet Opinion on Expeditions Against Spanish Territory, 10 March 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives and "To George Washington from Edmund Randolph, 11 March 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

vision to governing. Randolph opposed the fourth proposal on two grounds. One was tactical. He was afraid that Clark's men could interpret the preemptive move of federal forces as a hostile act that could escalate the situation, and he was nervous that one wrong step could result in a bloody civil war and the West's "separation from the union."¹²

The second reason was constitutional. Randolph argued that the president lacked the authority to use federal force in such a way. He believed that the Kentuckians' actions constituted an internal insurrection, not an invasion from a foreign nation. Randolph, the former attorney general, was well-versed in statutes, and he held that, according to the current laws of the nation, the president could intervene only if called upon by the Kentucky legislature or governor first, neither of which seemed inclined to do so. Randolph was not inherently opposed to Washington possessing the authority to undertake such an action; he just believed the president needed to establish the executive's right to do so through new legislation. He thus argued that Congress needed to first pass a new law that empowered the president to act in such circumstances.¹³

The difference between Randolph and the rest of the Cabinet revealed the differences emerging among the parties. Randolph's argument deferred to local authorities and reflected a strict interpretation of constitutional power that left the executive weaker. Washington and his allies, meanwhile, adopted a far more practical and expansive approach to the executive's powers. Just as Washington had to think on multiple fronts when it came to foreign policy, he had to do the same when it came to domestic issues. In this case, the controversy over the use of federal power in Kentucky was happening alongside other ongoing debates within his Cabinet about assertions of federal authority in other parts of the country. In particular, Washington was

¹² "To George Washington from Edmund Randolph, 11 March 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

¹³ *Ibid.*

juggling a parallel internal crisis in which a body of recalcitrant westerners refused to comply with federal taxes and whose open defiance also tested the mettle of the executive's authority. Since 1791, westerners, especially those in Pennsylvania around Pittsburgh, had opposed a whiskey tax, and their objections only grew more heated as the federal government refused to rescind the tax. In this Pennsylvania dispute, Washington was taking a light hand toward the protestors. He wanted to avoid an open conflict between the government and the people. He hoped instead that he could convince westerners to comply with the tax through appeals to reason and sent representatives from the federal government to the region to convince Pennsylvanians of their duty. Some in his Cabinet, however, wished for military action so Washington could make a statement about federal authority that would reverberate throughout the nation. Washington had, up until this point, demurred, though he was also preparing for a possible military confrontation.

In Kentucky, however, Washington considered the situation graver. He believed he had to act forcefully and immediately, and that he could do so without having to appeal to Congress or the Supreme Court because he considered it illegal for a group of citizens to organize an invasion of another country with whom the United States was at peace. If he failed to stop their actions, he knew, war would come to the country, and he was determined to stop a small band of angry citizens from forcing the U.S. into conflict it was trying to avoid. The Kentuckians posed more of an immediate and fundamental constitutional threat and, as far as Washington was concerned, he was dutybound to protect the Constitution and preserve the Union. Because of that obligation, he had the authority to exercise executive power to maintain both.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid.

In the weeks that followed, Washington's administration rolled out these initiatives. William Bradford, Randolph's successor as Attorney General of the United States, drafted Washington's proclamation. Hamilton, Knox, and Randolph then collaboratively revised the text before presenting it to the president. It was given to Washington on March 24, and he signed off on it later that day with only minor alterations. In it, he took a firm stance toward those involved in Clark's scheme. Titled "Proclamation on Expeditions Against Spanish Territory," Washington ordered all Americans involved to cease and desist. "I have received information," Washington began, "that certain persons in violation of the laws, presumed under colour of a foreign authority to enlist citizens of the United States and others within the state of Kentucky, and have there assembled an armed force for the purpose of invading and plundering the territories of a nation at peace with the said United States."¹⁵

Washington then made clear that he considered any such activities illegal – "criminal" he said – and used the proclamation to affirm the executive's right to stop citizens from interfering with the country's foreign policy. "It is the duty of the Executive," Washington declared, "to take care that such criminal proceedings be suppressed, the offenders brought to justice, and all good citizens cautioned against measures likely to prove so pernicious." Such declarations were vital as the federal government established its authority. Washington was not just asserting his rights, he was also educating his citizens on the constitutional powers that the president possessed. To make his position as clear as possible, he ordered every citizen to reject any future appeals to join Clark's effort and warned anyone who persisted that they did so "at their peril." More importantly, in response to Kentucky officials' inaction, Washington enjoined "all court magistrates and other officers" to "exert their powers" to suppress any rebellion and, most

¹⁵"To George Washington from Edmund Randolph, 19 March 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives and "Proclamation on Expeditions Against Spanish Territory, 24 March 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

pointedly, “to bring condign punishment on those who may have been guilty” of organizing an illegal military action.¹⁶

Washington’s proclamation was printed and shipped to General Anthony Wayne, then stationed in the Ohio River valley, and other officials based along the western frontiers. They copied, posted, and distributed it throughout the region. Washington’s actions had their intended effects in the capital city. Senator John Brown, an earlier ally of Genêt and advocate for the invasion, shifted his position soon after hearing of Washington’s reaction. Rather than encouraging the initiative among his friends and family in Kentucky, he began sharing intelligence from his own informants in the border region with the administration, as a way to help them suppress his former partners. His family, though, was divided. His brother, James, Kentucky’s Secretary of State, remained recalcitrant and continued to advise Governor Shelby to avoid interfering with Clark, describing state intervention as “impolitic.”¹⁷

Meanwhile, on March 29, a few days after this proclamation, Edmund Randolph added to the federal response by directly addressing Kentucky Governor Shelby’s defiance. Washington knew that the Kentuckians needed to cease and desist, lest anarchy prevail. Guided by Washington’s firm proclamation, Randolph applied a heavy hand in a long letter that combined biting sarcasm with a stern dressing down. He took direct aim at what he considered Shelby’s specious arguments that he, as governor, had no authority to intercede. In doing so, Randolph confronted some of the fundamental constitutional questions that the Kentuckians had raised, issues that dealt with the federal government’s role in a federated republic and the constraints

¹⁶ “Proclamation on Expeditions Against Spanish Territory, 24 March 1794,” *Founders Online*, National Archives.

¹⁷ “Enclosure: Extract of A Letter from Kentucky, 25 January 1794,” *Founders Online*, National Archives and “To George Washington from Edmund Randolph, 27 February 1794,” *Founders Online*, National Archives. On James Brown, see James Brown to Shelby, February 16, 1794, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1040-1042. See also John Brown’s deposition recounting his involvement in American State Papers, Miscellany, 1:931, <https://memory.loc.gov/l1/lsp/037/0900/09470931.tif>.

that federal policy could place on individual citizens. Were Americans free to do whatever they wanted, so long as they broke no laws within their country? Did an American citizen's obligations to their government end as soon as one left the United States? Shelby's answer to both questions was an unambiguous "yes." Randolph used his letter to make it clear why Shelby was wrong in the most pointed terms possible. For Randolph, the most important question was: If a government is unable to restrain its citizens from launching an invasion that was sure to throw their country into a war, does the government really possess the fundamental power it claims to have?¹⁸

"What government can be so destitute of the means of self-defence," Randolph asked Shelby, "as to suffer, with impunity, its peace to be drawn into jeopardy by hostilities levied within its territory against a foreign nation, order to be prostrated at the will of tumultuous individuals, and scenes of bloodshed and civil war to be introduced?" Randolph took particular umbrage with Shelby's unwillingness to stop the four French agents who continued to recruit. Such direct foreign interference in American affairs, Randolph explained, was not only unprecedented but outside well-established international norms. "That foreigners would meddle in the affairs of a government where they happen to be, has scarcely ever been tolerated," Randolph exclaimed, "and is often severely punished." Echoing Washington's view on the stakes, the French activity in Kentucky, he told Shelby, was tantamount to an assault upon the United States' sovereignty that could not be tolerated if the United States was to be a free and independent nation. "That foreigners should point the force of a nation, against its will, to objects of hostility, is an invasion of its dignity, its tranquility, and even safety," Randolph explained to the obstinate governor.¹⁹

¹⁸ Isaac Shelby to Thomas Jefferson, January 13, 1794, *American State Papers*, 1:455-456.

¹⁹ Edmund Randolph to Isaac Shelby, March 29, 1794, *American State Papers*, 1:456-457.

Randolph concluded his excoriation with a firm assertion of federal authority, one that perhaps went against his own personal inclinations but served the administration's position. He dismissed Shelby's claims of powerlessness. In what was surely a subtle dig at Shelby, Randolph acknowledged that the "civil arm may sometimes be unequal to the task of sustaining civil authority" in distant locales like Kentucky, a critique that Shelby likely read as a chastisement. When that occurred, Randolph explained, the federal government could intervene – even though he had earlier and privately questioned its ability. To make his point, Randolph sent a copy of a militia law that gave the president the power to use federal marshals or call on state militias when local governments appeared too feeble to ward off an invasion from external enemies or from "an insurrection" from within. Randolph likely did not personally agree that this situation fit that definition – Kentucky's state government, to Randolph, did not seem to be failing as much as following the letter of the current laws of the country that did not explicitly bar behavior like Clark's. Nonetheless, as Secretary of State, he marshaled the argument he needed to serve the administration. He used the militia law to show Shelby that the president had the power to stop what the administration saw as a possible insurrection. It was a veiled threat, in which Randolph used the specter of federal officials taking control of local affairs, something that Shelby likely feared more than anything, to prod Shelby to use the levers of state government at his disposal.

Next, on March 31, just two days after Randolph wrote his letter, Secretary of War Knox ordered Anthony Wayne to establish a fort on the Mississippi River near Louisville that could block Clark's potential invasion, an action to which Randolph objected. The orders themselves likely did not surprise Wayne. Knox and Wayne had previously discussed establishing such a fort for other strategic military reasons, but its erection was never a top priority. In the past,

Knox had deferred to Wayne's on-the-ground judgment as to whether he had the resources to allocate for its construction. Now, with Clark's invasion apparently imminent, Knox told Wayne that he had to build the fort immediately. He also included "secret and confidential" instructions that authorized the lethal use of force against American citizens engaged in the invasion of Louisiana. "If notwithstanding every peaceable effort to persuade them to abandon their criminal design they should still persist in their attempts to pass down the Ohio, you are to use every military means in your power for preventing them," Knox ordered. With these directives issued, Washington had authorized U.S. forces to attack American citizens if they attempted their invasion of a foreign country.²⁰

Wayne followed his orders. By the end of May, he had sent troops to establish the fort. Wayne assured Knox that he understood the "secret and confidential" instructions sent to him, noting that he entrusted the major overseeing the fort with "a literal copy of those you mentioned in your letter of the 31st of March." Similar commands were sent in May to Georgia's governor, once again over Randolph's firm objection, because the government had learned that Genêt had a similar scheme afoot there as well.²¹

The debates that Washington heard among his Cabinet secretaries, especially the objections of Randolph, convinced him that the federal government needed to take one more important step. Randolph may have failed to persuade Washington that the president lacked the authority to use federal forces, but his arguments did convince Washington that the government should more clearly establish that behavior like Clark's was illegal and that the federal

²⁰Henry Knox to Anthony Wayne, March 31, 1794, *American State Papers*, 1:458-459 and "To George Washington from Henry Knox, 2 April 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

²¹"To George Washington from Henry Knox, 14 May 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives. Knox to Wayne, March 31, 1794, *Anthony Wayne, A Name in Arms: Soldier, Diplomat, Defender of Expansion Westward of a Nation; The Wayne-Knox-Pickering-McHenry Correspondence*, Richard Knopf, ed. (Pittsburgh, 1959), 313-320, and Wayne to Knox, May 26, 1794, in *Anthony Wayne: A Name in Arms*, 332-334.

government had the authority to stop it. Doing so would render arguments like Randolph's moot in the future. On May 20, Washington called on Congress to address the issue. He presented to both the Senate and House of Representatives the evidence of the invasion that his administration had. He ended with a call to action: "I am impelled by the position of our public affairs to recommend that provision be made for a stronger and more vigorous opposition, than can be given to such hostile movements under the laws as they now stand."²²

Congress heeded his words. In an unusual show of unity, and a telling sign of just how consequential Genêt's brief term was on American history and how serious the Kentucky conspiracy was, both houses passed sweeping legislation on June 5 addressing the central questions the controversy had raised. The entire Genêt-Clark episode had exposed two vulnerabilities in the federal government that needed to be rectified. One was a challenge to its authority created by a foreign country trying to meddle in US domestic affairs. The other was a challenge posed by citizens who believed they were free to act however they wished outside the jurisdiction of the United States. "An Act for the Punishment of Certain Crimes against the United States" addressed these two issues by giving the president clear and explicit power to intervene in such circumstances and by clarifying the rights, obligations, and limitations of citizenship. It said, for instance, "that if any person shall within the territory or jurisdiction of the United States enlist or enter himself ... in the service of any foreign prince or state as a soldier ... or letter of marque or privateer, every person so offending shall be deemed guilty of a high misdemeanor." Section 5 of the law took specific aim at Clark's expedition. It outlawed Americans from participating in or organizing "any military expedition or enterprise to be

²² "From George Washington to the United States Senate and House of Representatives, 20 May 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

carried on from thence against the territory or dominions of any foreign prince or state with whom the United States are at peace.”²³

Initiating the passage of such defining and precedent-setting laws was a key part of Washington’s tenure and his legacy. As Americans tried to establish the role of the federal government in their society, debates like the one Randolph had with the Cabinet were happening throughout the countryside. Washington knew that if a trusted advisor like Randolph had issues with what he assumed were inherent executive powers, then others certainly did, others perhaps less respectful than Randolph. By explicitly forbidding citizens to do what Clark was attempting, and by outlining strict punishment for anyone who supported an invasion of a foreign country such as Genêt had encouraged by outfitting privateers, the law did exactly what Randolph had argued was needed in his earlier objections. The law was so essential that, even though it was initially set to expire every two years, it was renewed until 1800, when Congress made it perpetual.²⁴

While this law showed firmness, Congress took two other unusual steps that were done to allay the Kentuckians’ apprehensions and de-escalate the situation. At the prodding of Kentucky’s two senators, the Senate passed two additional resolutions, one on May 15 and another on June 5, that affirmed the United States’ commitment to opening the Mississippi River to Americans. Washington worried that such resolutions might blur the lines of diplomatic authority between the executive and Congress, so the resolutions also acknowledged executive privilege and the need for secrecy surrounding the negotiations. “That as it appears from the communications of the executive, that the right of the United States to the free navigation of the

²³ United States Statutes at Large, Volume 1, Public Acts of the Third Congress, 1st Session, Chapter 50. <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/3rd-congress/session-1/c3s1ch50.pdf> On it being made perpetual, see *Foreign Relations of the United States*, (Washington, D.C., 1872), 1:539.

²⁴ Ibid.

Mississippi, is now the subject of negotiation with the court of Spain; and as it is the interest of the United States, and every part thereof, to come to an amicable adjustment of the right in that mode," the Senate declared on June 5. The resolutions thus showed the way in which the early government – Washington and Congress – worked in unison to maintain the union by complementing each other's actions. In this case, on the same day Congress passed the law that outlawed Clark's actions, an act clearly aimed at reining in Kentuckians, the Senate also passed a resolution reassuring Kentuckians of the country's commitment to opening the Mississippi River without breaching any of executive branches' rights.²⁵

What Congress as well as Washington knew as they passed these resolutions was that the administration's diplomatic affairs were fast improving on several different fronts. A new French minister, Jean Antoine Joseph Fauchet, had arrived in Philadelphia. He was sent to replace Genet by the new French regime who wished to appoint one of their own. Fauchet carried a far different deportment than the brash, idealistic Genet. Fauchet immediately rescinded Genet's orders and denounced his predecessor's actions. Spain, meanwhile, showed a renewed interest in resolving the Mississippi dispute. Spanish ministers, aware of the growing tensions along the river's banks, realized that a peaceful resolution was preferable to conflict. Edmund Randolph had even confided as much to Shelby in March. In addition to his scolding, he had also let Shelby know that the Washington administration had men in Madrid actively negotiating to open the river to American goods. Although Randolph expressed reticence in sharing private executive business with the governor, he assured Shelby that everyone was confident that the United States was moving toward "a peaceable expectation of the result."²⁶

²⁵ "To George Washington from Edmund Randolph, 15 July 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

²⁶ Edmund Randolph to Isaac Shelby, March 29, 1794, *American State Papers*, 1:456-457.

The swift and coordinated actions of the federal government, along with these changes in diplomacy, brought about a rapid change in Clark's affairs. He was unable to absorb both the loss of French backing and the weight of the federal government bearing down on him. Many of the enlistees began returning to their homes. To add to Clark's woes, a new threat shifted Kentuckians' focus. The tense stand-off between American forces and Native groups in the Ohio River Valley grew hotter as the summer approached in 1794. Miami, Delaware (Lenape) Indians, and other Native nations, aided by the British who constructed new forts in the Ohio, began preparing to militarily defend their sovereignty in the face of American settler encroachments.²⁷

The direct involvement of the British drew American ire, especially given U.S. neutrality. It seemed as if the British were taking advantage of the situation and trying to pick a fight. With a conflict brewing, Kentuckians rather than preparing for an assault on New Orleans where preparing for an attack on their own land, and Anthony Wayne, who was prepared to squash the Kentuckians' attack on Spain with force, now wanted to call out 2,000 Kentucky militiamen to help him defend American forts. Overtaken by this combination of events, Clark's scheme evaporated. Rumors of its potential reformation persisted throughout the summer, but Clark instead spent most of his time stewing over the enormous bill he had racked up – to the tune of \$4,800 dollars, almost three times as much as the APS had raised for Michaux's expedition.²⁸

Still, Kentuckians remained politically motivated if not militarily mobilized. Instead of mounting an invasion of Spanish Louisiana, a large group of angry Kentuckians redirected their lingering frustrations into more legitimate channels by descending on Lexington in June to

²⁷ See David Andrew Nichols, *Red Gentlemen and White Savages: Indians, Federalists, and the Search for Order on the American Frontier* (Charlottesville, 2008) especially chapters 6 and 7 and Calloway, *The Indian World of George Washington*, (Oxford, 2018), 437.

²⁸ "To George Washington from Henry Knox, 12 May 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives and Wayne to Knox, June 10, 1794, *Anthony Wayne*, 339-342 *

convene an assembly to discuss their shared concerns. They ended it by passing a series of resolutions that laid bare their grievances with the federal government. In thirteen points, the protesters' screed made clear that the seeds of their disaffection that had spurred their support of Clark's endeavor were still alive. Most of their complaints, as before, focused on their inability to access the Mississippi River. To make their point, they declared that they were entitled "by nature and by stipulation" to "the free and undisturbed navigation of the river Mississippi."²⁹

Their rhetoric also exposed a much deeper issue that could tear asunder the nation. Those frustrated Kentuckians accused the "general government" of failing in its fundamental duty to serve the needs of its citizens, a serious charge in an age in which Americans had used similar complaints as grounds for independence less than twenty years earlier. The petitioners took particular umbrage at what they saw as the government's regional favoritism. They pointed out that Washington's Neutrality Proclamation benefited "Eastern America" by serving the interests of merchants, traders, and industrialists in the country's port cities who relied on British trade. Meanwhile, the president, they claimed, ignored the needs of "western America."

This geographical and, in turn political, division ran throughout their resolutions. Repeatedly they complained of their position as "inhabitants of the Western Country" who were ignored by a distant, unfeeling eastern government that was focused on the separate and distinct needs of those living on the other side of the Appalachian Mountains, those who were also closer to the seat of power. In their final point, these Kentuckians' complaints verged on a threat to separate from the nation. "That the attainment and security of these our rights, is the common cause of the Western people, and that we will unite with them in any measures that may be most expedient for that purpose," they declared.³⁰

²⁹ "To George Washington from Kentucky Citizens, 24 May 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

³⁰ To George Washington from Kentucky Citizens, 24 May 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

After making their complaints clear, the group then passed two resolves that outlined their future action, both of which were meant to apply greater pressure on the federal government. They vowed to expand their organizing efforts beyond Kentucky to include “the other inhabitants of the Western Country.” Locally, they called on men in every Kentucky county to form groups similar to theirs. If things remained unchanged, these county groups were “to elect proper persons to represent them in Convention, for the purpose of deliberating on the steps which will be most expedient for the attainment and security of our just rights.” Combined, these steps were meant to mobilize Kentuckians and others in the West into a more formalized political organization.³¹

The language of the last resolution – “for the attainment and security of our just rights” – contained hints of revolution that were easily recognized by those in Washington’s Cabinet, men who had fought to secure just such things from Great Britain a generation earlier. In fact, where Kentuckians saw their convention as a legitimate means of organizing a political protest, those in Washington’s Cabinet, many of whom had lived through the American Revolution, saw the creation of these extralegal organizations as dangerous and illegal assemblies that threatened the existing government. These bodies reminded those veterans of the American Revolution of the Committees of Correspondence which American patriots had formed in towns and counties before the thirteen colonies declared themselves independent. Such committees had been vital in bringing revolutionaries together in the lead-up to the Declaration of Independence. For a time, the committees operated as a shadow government, separate from the official British imperial government. Many in the East who read the Kentucky Resolutions feared that the organizers of

³¹ Lexington Resolutions, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1056-1058.

the gathering now had similarly rebellious intentions. “The illegality” Secretary of War Knox concluded of the meeting, “seems to be unquestionable.”³²

Washington was unsure how to respond to the Kentucky remonstrance and resolves. He once again polled his Cabinet. This time, their opinions were unanimous. As Edmund Randolph noted to Washington upon reading the resolutions, “The temper of that country is roused to an extreme.” Randolph, like his colleagues, found the Kentuckians’ expectations unreasonable, if not completely unfounded.³³

One of the other issues that the Kentuckians had focused on was executive privilege – something Washington too had been aware of as he considered what to do with Clark and a topic still very much in debate today, more than two centuries later. The Kentuckians demanded that Washington give them regular updates on negotiations to open the Mississippi River. While doing so might have appeased these furious frontiersmen, Randolph adamantly opposed such a gesture. He argued that sharing private diplomatic negotiations posed a dangerous threat to the executive, and to the government more generally, by establishing a “precedent for throwing open the archives of the executive to the whole world, on all occasions.” Randolph, though perturbed by the request, also believed that the government had already adequately acquiesced to the Kentuckians in practice. His letter to Shelby on March 29 contained news of progress with Spain, as did the subsequent Congressional resolves. Once word reached the Kentucky elite, he hoped reason would reign in Kentucky.³⁴

The Kentucky remonstrance and resolutions caused Cabinet officials to once again fear the prospect of war and fret about the stability of the country. “What if the government of

³² “To George Washington from Henry Knox, 14 July 1794,” *Founders Online*, National Archive.

³³ “To George Washington from Edmund Randolph, 15 July 1794,” *Founders Online*, National Archives.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Kentucky should force us either to support them in their hostilities against Spain or disavow and renounce them?” Randolph asked his friend and predecessor Thomas Jefferson in August, “The lopping off of Kentucky from the Union is dreadful to contemplate, even if it should not attach itself to some other power.” Cabinet members worried that if Washington took a misstep by acting too forcefully, then Kentuckians, primed to fight, might respond with a violent defense of their rights which could lead to disunion. The Cabinet thus recommended a moderate federal response for the moment, in part, surely, because they knew that the situation, while volatile, seemed to be settling down. “No notice be at present taken of the remonstrance & resolves,” Knox advised, “But it would appear proper that at the meeting of Congress the President should take notice also in his speech of the resolves & remonstrance in a temperate but firm manner.”³⁵

Washington then shifted his gaze across the Atlantic, to Madrid, believing the time was right to push the Spaniards to open the Mississippi. He decided to dispatch a special envoy to negotiate a treaty in the summer of 1794. His first choice was a logical if somewhat surprising one: Thomas Jefferson. Washington wanted to send the experienced diplomat to Madrid to take over the negotiations meant to resolve the Mississippi question. Jefferson’s extensive diplomatic experience surely factored into Washington’s request, but he also knew that many Kentuckians saw Jefferson as a political ally. His appointment would help assuage their fears and better establish trust between the West and the federal government. His close friend and successor as Secretary of State, Edmund Randolph, approached Jefferson to see if he would come out of retirement and serve in the administration again, this time as a special envoy to Spain. Jefferson demurred. “No circumstances my dear Sir will ever more tempt me to engage in any thing public,” Jefferson replied to his friend. Stymied, Washington next asked Virginian Patrick

³⁵ “To Thomas Jefferson from Edmund Randolph, 28 August 1794,” *Founders Online*, National Archives; “To George Washington from Henry Knox, 14 July 1794,” *Founders Online*, National Archives.

Henry, another noted ally of the West. He too passed. Washington settled on Thomas Pinckney, a diplomat then stationed in London, whose coach, coincidentally, Genêt had rented in his ride from Charleston to Philadelphia.³⁶

Spanish officials made perhaps the most consequential decision in response to the Kentuckians' fervency. The Kentucky resolves had also landed on the desk of Carondelet, the governor of Spanish New Orleans. Aware of just how vulnerable Spain's grasp on the region was and afraid of what the future might hold if the Mississippi River remained sealed off from these raging and volatile Kentuckians, Carondelet penned a letter to Madrid advising the imperial government that they needed to open the Mississippi quickly. "The circumstances are urgent," Carondelet reported, "as I do not doubt that they will begin hostilities at the end of the year, in case we have not then made a friendly agreement."³⁷

In the meantime, as Carondelet waited for something official to happen in the halls of power across the Atlantic, he took a unilateral action meant to dilute the fury of the Kentuckians. He ignored Madrid's orders to enforce a fifteen percent tariff on American goods arriving in New Orleans. His decision to cut the rate effectively gave Americans what they most sought, commercial use of the Mississippi River. The gesture, albeit temporary, was meant to dampen any lingering enthusiasm Kentuckians may have had for Clark's cause. "You will see," he told his superiors, "by what is happening what good reason I have had for suspending the execution of the Royal order regarding the reestablishment of the 15% duty on all products of Kentucky and other settlements of the West that come down to this Province by the Ohio; which would

³⁶ "To Thomas Jefferson from Edmund Randolph, 28 August 1794," *Founders Online*, National Archives; Samuel Flagg Bemis, *Pinckney Treaty: A Study of America's Advantage from Europe's Distress* (Baltimore, 1926) and Deconde, *This Affair of Louisiana*, 60-62

³⁷ Carondelet to Alcudia, New Orleans, July 30, 1794, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1069-1070.

have hastened the hostile determinations of the same, inducing them perhaps to unite and help the French expedition of Gen. Clarck which he tried to form on the Ohio.”³⁸

Carondelet’s decision was startling. It meant that by the end of the summer, Clark’s proposed expedition, initiated and facilitated by André Michaux, and from the French perspective a total disaster, was, in fact, a resounding success for the Kentuckians. A group of citizens, angry with what they saw as their own government’s inaction, pressured the forces whom they saw as intractable to bend to their will. It is true that both impediments (the Spanish government and the Washington administration.) were already working toward the solution that the Kentuckians desired, but the military mobilization on the banks of the Mississippi surely sped up the process. By the fall of 1794, Americans could trade on the Mississippi without any punitive tariffs. Within a year, their success would become even more tangible when Spain, battered by war with France and worried about their weak control on Louisiana, formally acquiesced to the United States’ demands in the Pinckney Treaty and officially opened the Mississippi to unencumbered trade. Although many Kentuckians showed themselves willing to take up arms and risk their lives to accomplish this goal, they ultimately accomplished their aims without having to fire one shot or suffer any casualties.³⁹

In some measure, the affair was a victory for Washington and his desire to maintain union. Though a combination of federal power and compassion, Washington managed to destroy the plot while also, he hoped, assuaging Kentuckians concerns about his commitment to opening the Mississippi River. Washington had also taken an important step in his own evolution as an executive during the affair. Washington decided that in order to maintain the nation’s security,

³⁸ Carondelet to Alcudia, New Orleans, July 30, 1794, *Correspondence of Clark and Genêt*, 1069-1070. On other discussions, see Whittaker, *Spanish-American Frontier*, 101-102, 176, 192-193.

³⁹ On the Pinckney Treaty, see *A New History of Kentucky*, 73-74 and especially Bemis, *Pinckney’s Treaty*.

and perhaps even its existence, he needed to yield federal authority in a way he had not yet done before, going so far as to authorize the use of the United States military to tamp down citizens. Such a decision likely played into one of the more well-known and pivotal acts he took as president. In a few months, the protests against the whiskey tax in Pittsburgh turned violent and deadly as federal marshals clashed with bands of armed and organized civilians. Reports made it appear like a warzone, with militias targeting federal officials. In the fall of 1794, a few months after the Kentucky controversy, Washington decided to mobilize militias and personally march west to suppress what he saw as an internal rebellion. This earlier episode surely played a role in Washington's decision to act so forcefully against the whiskey rebels. Having almost deployed U.S. troops on Kentuckians who threatened to upend the United States' foreign policy and having had to deal with a near attack on Louisiana, he realized that a symbolic assertion of federal authority was necessary if he was to keep the American West a part of the federal union.

One other figure deeply involved in the plot saw its end as something of a victory: André Michaux. Michaux managed to elude any notice – thanks, in large measure, to his friend Jefferson, who likely kept Michaux's name out of the affair to protect his own reputation as much as the French botanist's. For Michaux, although the invasion of Spanish Louisiana fizzled, its demise proved to be a boon for his research. The botanist, always uncomfortable with his appointment as a secret military operative, could shift his attention back to his natural history interests. His real work, he knew, remained unfinished. He was ready to return to it.